

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a flowing red dress, stands on a rocky cliff overlooking a body of water. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the viewer. The background features rugged cliffs and a distant shoreline.

BLACKHAVEN BRIDES
BOOK TWO

THE WICKED LADY

MARY LANCASTER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE IMPERIAL SEASON*

The Wicked Lady

Blackhaven Brides

Book Two

Mary Lancaster



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Chapter One

TRISTRAM GRANT STEPPED into the glittering ballroom.

"Grant!" a familiar voice called.

Dr. Lampton, the town physician, and his wife were seated opposite the door. Since it was they who had invited him to come, he edged his way around the dance floor, smiling and murmuring greetings to the regular members of his congregation whom he recognized.

"You came," Mrs. Lampton observed in delight, as he bowed and took his seat beside her. "So, what do you think of our devilish entertainment?"

"Be reasonable, my dear," Dr. Lampton said wryly. "When has he ever called anything devilish?"

The Lamptons were Grant's only friends in Blackhaven who didn't attend church. The doctor was a self-confessed, free-thinker.

"I'm very happy to be here," Grant said pacifically. "And I hope you will dance with me," he added to Mrs. Lampton.

"I insist upon it," she said at once. "Now, who else would you like me introduce you to?"

Grant blinked. "No one in particular. I know most of them already."

Lampton grinned at him. "You haven't caught on yet, have you? You're here so Mary can find you a wife."

Grant couldn't help it. He laughed. "I'm a curate. Supposing I could afford a wife, who would have me?"

"Most of them," Mrs. Lampton said stoutly. "See how they watch you from behind their fans?"

"No," Grant said, refusing to remove his gaze from her face. "I am quite content with the view I have."

Mrs. Lampton clapped her hands. "Oh well said, sir! You are a natural."

Dr. Lampton poured him some wine from a bottle by his elbow. "Drink up," he advised.

His wife leaned forward confidentially. "Now, Mr. Grant, which young lady has caught your attention over the two months you've been with us?"

"I find them all most charming."

"He does," Lampton agreed. "And it's my belief he doesn't need

your interference to find himself a wife."

"Then why doesn't he have one?" Mrs. Lampton asked with an air of triumph.

"Because he doesn't want one?" Lampton suggested.

"Nonsense. Every vicar should have a wife."

"I'm not the vicar," Grant pointed out.

"You are while Mr. Hoag is away ... and if he obtains the promotion he's hoping for, who knows? I'm sure Lord Braithwaite will like you."

"Everybody *likes* him," Lampton said wryly.

"Why do I feel at fault here?" Grant murmured, raising his glass.

"Because you make the rest of us look bad," Lampton said at once. "Here you are, upright and handsome, good-natured, compassionate, hard-working on behalf of the poor, with just the right manners to extract donations from the rich. Apparently, content in any company from drunken sailors to aristocracy. And the ladies, from old biddies to young maidens, drool after you. Of course you are at fault."

"At least I don't tell lies."

"Neither do I," Lampton said at once. "Now, for the love of peace, point out the most deserving young lady to my wife, so that she might present you and relax. And don't tell her you're already acquainted with everyone in Blackhaven, because, trust me, you're not. Mary is."

Mrs. Lampton frowned quellingly at her husband and returned to the matter in hand. "It can be a stranger, a visitor," she said encouragingly. "In case you don't wish to single out a girl of your congregation just at first."

Lampton sat back with a grin, watching Grant for signs of discomfort. Grant, however, was quite happy to dance, since he'd come to a ball. On the other hand, he saw no harm in teasing.

"Miss Bramley," Mrs. Lampton suggested. "Her mother is taking the waters and she is such a charming girl."

"She is," Grant agreed. "But her gown is too white."

Mrs. Lampton pursed her lips at his frivolity. "Miss Bainbridge. Being no longer a debutante, her gown is *not* white, but she is a most intelligent—and pretty—young lady."

"Her mother terrifies me."

"No, she doesn't! Miss Smallwood, then. So sweet and good-natured."

"And young. Too young."

"Mr. Grant, are you taking this seriously?"

"Not remotely," Grant admitted, just as the most beautiful woman imaginable walked into the ballroom alone.

She was breathtaking. Raven-black hair most elegantly styled to frame a face of exquisite beauty. Perfect, creamy white skin and full,

rosy lips. Huge, dark eyes that seemed at once to smolder and yet regard the world with distant, wry amusement. Surely a creature of fascinating contradictions.

"For example," Grant said, without taking his eyes off her, "I would be most grateful for an introduction to *that* lady."

"That lady?" Mrs. Lampton said in dismay. "Oh, dear me, no, you wouldn't. Trust me, she would do no good to your career or your marital hopes. *That* is Lady Crowmore."

Grant spared her a blank glance. "Should I know the name?"

"She was here before, one of the earl's house guests for the castle ball in the spring. Since then, her husband died. Does she look like a widow to you?"

He had to allow that she didn't. There was no trace of black about her dress. She wore a gown of deep, dusky pink and diamonds winked around her slender throat and dangled from her delectable ear lobes. Other jewels sparkled in her hair and in the clinging gauze folds of her gown. Her gloves were exactly the same shade of pink.

Grant's were not the only eyes drawn to her. In fact, nearly everyone was looking, covertly or overtly, and conversation died away to almost nothing. If it hadn't been for the orchestra continuing its waltz, the ballroom would have been eerily silent.

The radiant Lady Crowmore appeared not to notice, making her way around the edges of the dance floor. She accepted a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and her lips moved in a brief murmur of thanks. Oddly, that was what decided Grant.

He stood.

"But I don't know her," Mrs. Lampton objected. "Why do you have to pick the one woman in the room I've never met? And whom you can't possibly marry."

"I can introduce myself," Grant said calmly. "There are, after all, some benefits in being a clergyman. Excuse me."

As he moved among the groups sitting and standing around the dance floor, he couldn't help overhearing some of the remarks from those also watching the beautiful Lady Crowmore's entrance.

"Look at her! Not a hint of mourning!"

"My dear, she has no shame."

"Considering where they found her to break the news of Crowmore's death..."

"Does she even have an escort? She's quite alone."

"What is she doing here? Is she even going to speak to anyone?"

The criticism nearly all came from women, although no gentlemen sought her gaze or her company. Except young Bernard Muir, who, kicking his heels between his stepmother and his aunt, suddenly leapt to his feet, grinning. His hand began to lift just as Lady Crowmore

perversely veered to the left away from him, and almost walked into Grant.

They both came to an abrupt halt. The lady's eyes looked somewhat startled as they met his, but they didn't fall as she waited for him to stand aside. Brave and beautiful dark eyes, uncowed by convention or expectation. On the contrary, they seemed to challenge the world head-on, and yet held a hint of mystery as well as some open, almost cynical honesty. Something in Grant leapt. It felt like recognition. Certainly, on a much more basic level, his blood stirred.

"Forgive me," he said mildly. "I always seem to be in someone's way."

"The fault is trivial," she replied, "but clearly mine. Excuse me."

Her voice was enchanting, too—low, modulated, with just a hint of fashionable drawl. But since he was so uncivilly slow in moving aside, she began to walk around him.

"Perhaps you'd allow me to escort you to ... wherever you're going?" he suggested, turning belatedly aside.

Her lips curved into a sardonic smile. "To the devil, sir? I could not ask it of you."

"Precisely my subject of expertise," he said at once. "I might be your best protection."

"Oh, I don't need protection. The devil and I are old friends."

"Then I might at least surprise him."

Her step paused. She turned her head to face him once more, a hint of amusement in her deliberately distant gaze. She raised her perfectly arched eyebrows quizzically.

"Being a clergyman," he explained.

A breath of surprised laughter fell from her lips. "Truly?"

"Truly. Tristram Grant, curate of St. Andrew's Church here in Blackhaven."

She cocked her head to one side, consideringly. "Are you trying to save my soul, Master Curate?"

"Actually, I'm trying to dance with you, but if your soul is in need, I am at your disposal."

The amusement in her eyes grew more pronounced. "You're a very odd clergyman. But I'm disposed to like you, so I shall do you the favor of passing on with a mere nod of respect."

"If you would truly do me a favor," he said, keeping pace with her, although at a respectful distance, "you would grant me a dance. My friends are trying to marry me off and I need a shield."

The smile faded from her eyes. "I think you are trying to be kind to me."

"For purely selfish reasons. I would very much like to waltz with you."

She laughed, and set her untouched glass down upon the tray of a passing waiter. "Do you know who I am, Mr. Grant?"

"I know your name."

"Then by all means, let us see whether I ruin you or you save me in the eyes of your congregation. If you're bold enough."

Smiling, he bowed and took her hand, leading her onto the dance floor. Unexpectedly, he felt the faintest tremor of her fingers in his. He wasn't coxcomb enough to imagine his nearness affected her. But it was enough to arouse all his protective instincts, because the lady was not as invulnerable as she pretended. The slighting of the townspeople bothered her, might even hurt her. And when he placed his hand at her waist, she felt frail and brittle.

But she followed his lead quite naturally and with flawless grace.

"I don't remember you," she said abruptly. "I didn't know Mr. Hoag had a curate."

"He didn't until a couple of months ago, when it was felt his congregation had grown too large for one vicar to administer on his own."

"Well, I imagine you waltz better than Mr. Hoag," she allowed.

"I don't believe Mr. Hoag does waltz."

"But he doesn't forbid it in his presence as I recall."

"He is not so foolish as to imagine impropriety where there is none."

"And has learning to waltz been part of your training?" she inquired.

"Hardly."

"And yet you are quite accomplished, Mr. Grant. How come?"

"I learned abroad," he confessed.

"In war time," she said, thoughtfully.

"I learned many things abroad. What brings you to Blackhaven, Lady Crowmore?"

Annoyingly, the music was ending. She smiled. "Why, no one would dance with me in London. Thank you, Mr. Grant." She slid her gloved hand free of his and curtsied with a hint of irony. "I hope your friends find you a kind and dutiful wife, one who waltzes and makes you laugh. Goodbye."

And she slipped through the throng of departing dancers. He wanted to stand still and just watch her graceful, retreating back, see where she went next and to whom she spoke. But he knew what was due to her, and to his own calling. So, he turned instead toward the Lamptons, and walked back to ask Mary to dance.

LADY CROWMORE, KNOWN to her friends as Kate—in the days when she'd had friends—continued her promenade around the ballroom. Walking away from the handsome curate felt a little like turning her back on her savior.

But then she'd been foolish to come here, to imagine no one would have heard of her disgrace, or if they had, that they would behave any differently from London society. A fatal mixture of boredom and defiance had driven her alone from her hotel rooms to seek diversion among people whom she vaguely remembered as unpretentious and kind.

As soon as she'd stepped into the room, she'd recognized her mistake. The familiar hush and contemptuous stares had greeted her, followed by the shocked tittering of women behind their fans, and the salacious grins of men as they wished, secretly or otherwise, to have been in the shoes—or at least the bed—of Lord Vernon, her lover.

For Kate had finally committed the ultimate sin of her society. She'd been caught. Which was ironic in itself. And to top it all, she refused to wear widow's weeds, or sit quietly at home pretending a grief the world knew she didn't feel. Well, few men were less deserving of grief than the late Lord Crowmore. One had only to ask his servants, his tenants, or his wife. Only, of course, no one ever did. Or would, now that he was dead. Death apparently conferred some kind of bizarre sanctity.

The chairs around the ballroom were all taken, even if only with shawls or reticules hastily placed there as she approached. Kate pretended not to notice, let alone care. And in truth, it was easier now since her encounter with the curate. Pride had prevented her simply leaving again as soon as she'd stepped in the door. But now she'd walked, drunk champagne, and danced. When she'd strolled just a little more, she could leave and go back to her safe if unutterably dull hotel.

At last, she spied a solitary chair, pushed aside by a group of young men. She sat in it and summoned a waiter with a flick of her eyebrow. A glass of champagne in one hand and a lethargically waving fan in the other, made her more comfortable.

Mr. Grant, she saw, was dancing now with a lady of about her own age. Although this woman had little of what the world saw as style, she was pretty and she laughed up at the curate with a natural friendliness, an intimacy that Kate found she envied.

Well, he was a good-looking man in any profession. Tall and straight with hair the color of ripe chestnuts, he possessed a pair of compelling eyes, almost green in hue, that were both steady and ready to laugh. His face, like the rest of him, was just a little too lean, giving him a faintly ascetic appearance. And yet those eyes were not

remotely unworldly. Neither was his conversation.

She wondered if Mr. Grant realized just how grateful she was for his attention. More than that, he'd captured her interest. He'd intrigued her. He'd taken the awfulness away, just for a few minutes. He'd been fun.

But, of course, clergymen were not her type. Whether he'd acted from pity or interests of his own in dancing with her, her innate sense of fair play had forced her to release him. And he didn't glance once in her direction now.

"Good evening," said two male voices, almost in perfect time. She glanced up to see two young bucks of rakish appearance drawing up chairs to join her in her solitary corner.

She nodded distantly, and would have ignored them, had they not hemmed her in, one on each side like a maneuvering army.

She lifted one eyebrow. "Do I know you, gentlemen?"

"Not yet," one replied with what he probably imagined was a winning smile.

"Then be so good as to move aside. You're blocking my view of the dance floor."

One of them shifted slightly, but the other persevered. "Would your ladyship care to take a turn on the dance floor? Or perhaps a walk?"

She met his gaze, keeping her own hooded and amused. Normally, this was enough to depress the attentions of the young and mildly inebriated who were ridiculous enough to imagine they stood a chance with wicked Kate Crowmore.

But everything had changed now. It seemed she was meant to be grateful for such attentions. The bolder gentleman actually reached out and took her gloved hand.

Still she held his gaze. "Unhand me this instant, sir," she said mildly. "Or in the next, you will have my wine dripping off your chin onto that rather ill-tied cravat."

Shock froze him, until she began to raise her glass, when he stumbled hastily out of his chair and effaced himself, his friend at his heels. Kate sipped her champagne and wondered when she could leave.

Like the awful soiree in London, where everyone had cut her dead, this had been a mistake.

She wondered what all those haughty people would feel if they knew the truth, that *none* of the scandal associated with her name was true. That she'd never taken even one lover, not even on the night that Crowmore had died when they'd discovered her at Lord Vernon's house.

Trust Crowmore to get the last laugh. Even in death he'd managed

to hurt her. For in her heart she knew the truth would make no difference to the self-righteous who shunned her. They didn't care whether she'd actually had fifty lovers or none. The sin was in the appearance, in being caught.

*

GRANT DIDN'T APPROACH Lady Crowmore again. Nor did he glower at her from across the room in the manner of the notorious Lord Byron. But he did notice her occasionally, mostly sitting alone, once exchanging pleasantries with young Bernard Muir while the wealthy Miss Smallwood glared at him jealously from close-by. And once reducing two over-amorous young bucks to stammering incoherence while she drank her champagne and ignored them.

While Mary was occupied in other conversations, Grant drew his chair nearer Lampton's. "Spill," he invited. "What is the scandalous story of the widowed lady?"

Lampton shrugged. "That when they looked for her to tell her about her husband's not unexpected death, they found her in the bed of her lover, Lord Vernon."

Grant, who'd just taken a sip of wine, almost choked.

Lampton threw up one apologetic hand, clearly and fortunately misunderstanding. "That is the gossip. Truth is another matter. The lady is clearly avoiding something, though. Why else would she come to Blackhaven alone?" He cast a quick glance at Grant. "Smitten, my friend?"

"Utterly enchanted," Grant said at once.

He did what was expected of him: danced with several young women, chatted with their families and other acquaintances, and when, finally, he realized that Lady Crowmore was no longer in the ballroom, he said good night to the Lamptons and walked out into the foyer. Where, by chance, he saw Lady Crowmore emerging from the ladies' cloakroom.

The foyer, at that time of the evening, when it was too late for new arrivals and not yet time for most to depart, was empty. Still, she pretended not to see him, walking briskly toward the front exit. But Grant had long legs and caught her up in plenty of time to open the door for her.

"You're leaving so early?" she marveled. "Before the entertainment gets out of hand and orgiastic, I suppose. Probably best for a man of your calling."

"Are you making fun of our simple pleasures, my lady?" he asked as she glided past him into the street. "Or just of me?"

"Alas, you will never know." She turned and inclined her head.

“Good night, Mr. Grant.”

“You have no escort,” he observed. “Please, allow me—”

“That won’t be necessary,” she interrupted. “Thank you.” She nodded to the doorman, whose purpose Grant had usurped, and turned left in the direction of the hotel. The vicarage was to the right.

Grant knew an unexpectedly sharp twinge of disappointment. Chivalry was only his excuse. He simply wanted more of her unusual company. But she’d already defied convention by attending the ball alone. After that, walking to the hotel probably seemed trivial. Although it was only a hundred yards or less, and although Blackhaven was hardly a hotbed of crime, walking unaccompanied was not the done thing for a lady of her class. And yet, if she didn’t want him there, he couldn’t and wouldn’t inflict his company.

The lady was a notorious flirt. He just hadn’t expected her to be quite so fascinating, so different ... well, that was clearly the source of her power over men. And Tristram Grant, curate, was no different from others of his sex.

So he merely stood by the Assembly Room doors, aiming to make idle conversation with George the doorman until she vanished into the safety of the hotel. George, however, was called inside by Mr. Hawthorn, the manager, and so Grant simply loitered.

Which was why, without distraction, he saw the shadows detach themselves from the dark corners of the deserted street, both behind her and in front of her. From instinct, he set off briskly down the street in her wake, hoping his presence would scare off whatever villainy was intended before it happened. There were four shadows in all, clearly men, all closing in on her. Grant began to run.

She halted. “Who sent you?” she asked clearly.

A blade gleamed in the light of the gas lamp. Terrified for her now, Grant leapt at the nearest assailant, seizing him around the throat and hurling him into his fellow. The startled distraction of the other two gave him the moment he needed to run at them, crashing his fist into the face of the man with the blade, before spinning and kicking out at the fourth.

“Run!” he commanded Lady Crowmore, and whirled around to face the first two attackers, who’d untangled themselves and risen to rejoin the fray.

Lady Crowmore, however, did not run. And then the men were standing stock-still, because the lady pointed a very neat little pistol at them.

Chapter Two

ASTONISHED, AND NOT a little proud as she faced them down, Grant moved toward her, growling at the other two. "Be gone!"

For an instant, the man with the knife brandished his weapon. Then he snarled. "Leg it." And all four of them melted back into the shadows. Grant heard their running footsteps.

Miraculously, the street appeared to be empty once more. Taking no chances, Grant turned a full circle and, still scanning the street, offered Lady Crowmore his arm.

She took it. A quick glance showed him no trace of the little pistol, or any expression of distress.

"Timely intervention, Mr. Grant," she said calmly. "I am most grateful. What a devastating right hook ... for a clergyman."

"Well, when I was a much smaller clergyman," he said, walking forward while constantly searching the shadows, every sense on high alert. "About twelve or so years old, I occasionally had to defend myself, my dinner, and my allowance."

"You don't fight like a twelve-year-old," she said flatly. "They never got near you. None of them did."

"That had more to do with your pistol than my boxing skills."

Ahead, the hotel doorman emerged from within, yawning. He was about to lean against the wall when he caught sight of Grant and Lady Crowmore, and straightened once more.

"Evening, Sparrow," Grant said amiably. "Tell me..." He paused, for Lady Crowmore had definitely pinched his arm in a warning kind of a way. He could understand that. There was already enough gossip and scandal about her without adding speculation about tonight's attack—and, no doubt, his own interference. "All quiet tonight? I could swear I saw some ruffians lurking around the high street."

"No trouble at all, sir. A few strangers in town, but that's normal these days." He touched his hat and opened the door for Lady Crowmore. "Your ladyship."

Grant passed through the door after the lady into the gracious foyer. The young man at the desk was sprawled across it, flirting with one of the maids, who fled at the sight of guests. The clerk straightened immediately.

"Your hand is bleeding," Lady Crowmore observed, her voice unshaken, although Grant could have sworn there was a hint of

distress in her eyes.

"No, no," he assured her, "it's from the other fellow's face." He held her gaze. "Is there anything I might be able to assist you with?"

Her lips curved. "Do you mean looking under my bed for assassins?"

There was a boldness in her eyes that caused his already very aware body to flame. She'd meant that, of course, though it was hardly an invitation, merely her suspicion of his own motives. It made no difference. Despite his clamoring body, he would never take advantage of a moment of weakness.

"I meant inform the magistrate of what happened. And perhaps I might send a friend to you?" he managed.

She laughed. "My dear sir, I have no friends. Nor am I so poor spirited that I need my hand held over such a trivial incident." Unexpectedly, she extended her gloved fingers. "Give me *your* hand."

He obeyed. "You will stain your gloves," he warned.

"There, I should have worn black as all the old biddies wished." Her fingers closed around his hand, turning it to see the damaged knuckles. Grant wished her gloves to the devil that he might feel her skin on his. And he wished his hand less unsightly, her attention less practical.

Her nostrils flared, her only sign of distaste, but although he tried to withdraw, her fingers tightened. Over her shoulder, she called to the youth at the desk. "Mr. Smith, is it? Send for my maid, if you please. Desire her to bring my medicine box to me. In here," she added to Grant, dropping his hand at last to push open the nearest door, which appeared to be a kind of private parlor or perhaps a reception room. "Sit."

Like the young man at the desk, Grant obeyed, although with a hint of amusement. "There is no need, you know. It's just a graze." He sat on the stiff, formal little sofa.

"Be still," she commanded, taking the seat beside him, although at a decorous distance. She had, after all, left the door open. "Can you not see that my care for the injured curate is my last-ditch attempt to win Blackhaven's approbation?"

"Then clearly it would be churlish of me to flee. I give in to your kindness—and my own inclinations to enjoy your company for a few moments longer."

"Gallant," she allowed. "But you won't enjoy it. My salve stings like the devil."

Surprised laughter broke from him, and for some reason, she looked startled. He thought her breath caught before she dragged her gaze up to the open door. "Where is that wretched girl?"

"Why did you come here?" Grant asked, curiously.

"It's the best hotel in the town," she replied. "In fact, I believe it's the only one."

"I mean, why did you come to Blackhaven?"

She sighed, bringing her attention back to him. "I know what you meant. I just didn't want to believe you were like everyone else."

This time it was he who was startled. And mortified. "Forgive me. My calling does not make intrusive questions less insolent."

Again, she surprised him, a rueful smile curving her lips. "Thank God you do not yet see through all of my tricks. You are meant to crumble into abject excuses and avoid the subject."

"Oh, I'm crumbling."

"No, you're not. I don't believe you're a crumbling man."

He dropped his gaze to his sluggishly bleeding hand in his lap. "We all crumble at something."

For a moment she was silent. Bored probably by the less than witty comeback. It was a raw nerve he kept hidden.

"I came for peace," she said abruptly. "Like you, I should have known better."

He leaned forward to see her more clearly. "Who were those men who attacked you?"

"I have no idea, and you are the one who is bleeding."

"You're right. I shouldn't let people shove themselves into my fists."

She touched his wrist, butterfly-light and fleeting. "Thank you."

God, you could drown in those eyes. Behind the warm, genuine gratitude was a maelstrom of emotion he had no hope of untangling, let alone, understanding. But he knew he wouldn't give up trying.

The hurried click of footsteps across the foyer called him back to reality.

"At last," Lady Crowmore stood, stripping off her gloves, and indicating with an impatient wave of one of them, that Grant should remain seated. A youngish lady's maid entered the room, carrying a painted wooden box and closed the door behind her.

Lady Crowmore took the box from the maid and set it on the sofa beside Grant to open it. From a smaller, sealed box within, she took a small sponge and to his amazement, she knelt on the floor at his feet.

"Give me your hand," she said once more. And again, he obeyed, watching her face as she took it, this time in her naked fingers, causing his pulse to race. Her touch was soft, sensitive, both her left hand beneath his and the gentle action of her right as she cleaned his skinned knuckles with the damp sponge.

Like a surgeon's assistant he had once observed in a field hospital in Spain, the maid took the slightly gory sponge from her and presented her with a clean, dry cloth with which she gently yet firmly

patted his hand dry. The maid then took the cloth from her mistress and presented an open jar of ointment.

“Brace yourself,” Lady Crowmore said humorously, scooping a fingerful of the cream and smearing it over his knuckles. Although it stung, he didn’t flinch. He was too preoccupied with the changing expressions flitting across her beautiful face—concentration, sympathy, a hint of memory, perhaps, good and bad, and the same touch of humor with which she seemed to say and do most things. That, at least, was no affectation.

“You have brothers,” he guessed, “whom you got used to patching up, along with servants and other family dependents.”

She released his hand, placing it calmly on his knee while she replaced the lid on the jar. “Well, even the wickedest lady is brought up to be mistress of an establishment.”

“I don’t believe you’re wicked at all.”

Her eyes flew back to his as though struck. Then her lashes dropped, and when they rose again, her eyes were warm, sultry, and inviting enough to send desire raging through him. “Would you like me to prove otherwise, Master Curate?” she asked huskily. “Or are you too afraid for your reputation?”

The maid, clearly well trained, didn’t appear to hear as she fussily tidied the box and closed the lid.

Because he couldn’t help it, Grant reached out his still tingling hand and touched the lady’s soft, warm cheek. And now surely there was a hint of fear as well as excitement sparking in those expressive eyes. He’d surprised her. Possibly, she’d expected flight. Or a straightforward, amorous lunge. His body clamored for the latter. Still kneeling at his feet, she was close enough to see her effect on him, though she was not crass enough to look directly.

“You have nothing to prove to me,” he said steadily. “On the contrary, it is I who wish to prove myself worthy of *your* trust. For I believe you are in trouble. I would like to help, if you would let me.”

There was an instant, tiny but definite, when she actually leaned her cheek into his hand. A sudden, somehow honest gesture that made him doubt the seductive words that had come before. That had been a game, a pretense. She’d known he would not accept. But in this moment, her cheek against his palm truly moved him.

Then her long, black lashes came down again on whatever pain or temptation lay there.

“My trouble is of my own making,” she drawled, rising to her feet. “It always has been. And I would appreciate it if you kept quiet about this incident. If the magistrate is informed, my ... peace will be quite cut up.”

His hand fell back into his lap. He stood. “You know where to find

me if you change your mind.”

“Likewise,” she said outrageously.

Again, laughter snatched at his breath. He bowed. “On that understanding, I’ll bid you goodnight, Lady Crowmore.”

“Goodnight,” she said carelessly, draping herself into his vacated place on the sofa as he walked to the door and opened it. “Mr. Grant?”

He glanced back over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said.

He smiled and flexed his stinging right hand. “Thank *you*.”

He thought she smiled back as he closed the door, but it might have been wishful thinking.

*

DESPITE HER LACK of welcome in Blackhaven, and despite the unpleasant events outside the hotel, Kate woke the following morning with inexplicable lightness of heart. In fact, it felt peculiarly like hope. Because there were men like Mr. Tristram Grant in the world.

However, since she had no real intention of beginning a flirtation with anyone, let alone with a respected clergyman, she banished him from her mind, and began her day with an energetic walk on the beach before breakfast. Poor Little, her maid, seemed ready to drop by the time they returned. Mercilessly, Kate dragged her to the pump room with her as soon as they’d eaten.

The pump room was where one partook of the health-giving Blackhaven spring water which had made the town so popular. Kate had never been before, but since she had to have some reason for being in the town without family or friends, she decided she should go at least once. She supposed it would be like Bath.

Certainly, she found a lot of frail and elderly people there, some of them in obvious pain, quietly drinking from elegant glasses. They bowed politely to Kate who bowed back, heartened by the civility. Only a few of the haughtier, wealthier patrons snubbed her. Most of them nodded distantly with the clear hope she wouldn’t sit with them. She didn’t.

She sat alone and drank her glass of perfectly ordinary water. A lonely old lady with gout came and sat beside her, regaling her with stories of her ailments and about how the town had changed in the last few years.

“You must find it annoying to have your pleasant little town invaded by so many strangers,” Kate offered.

“Not at all,” the old lady protested. Her eyes twinkled. “To be frank, it was a very boring little town! We didn’t even know our water was special until outsiders came and told us so. And now, there is so

much more life about the place, so many more interesting and beautiful people to watch—like you, my dear.”

Kate laughed. “Thank you. Even though we clog up your streets and your church—”

“Oh, Mr. Hoag is quite in favor of the expansion.”

“And your new curate, also?” Kate asked casually.

“He must be. There are certainly more people coming to church since he began to take the services.” She cackled. “Mind you, he is a very handsome young man. Personable, too. I daresay any family, even the Winslows, would be delighted to have a daughter married to him.”

“I daresay,” Kate agreed, faintly.

“Mind you, he’s secretive,” the old lady allowed, setting down her empty glass. “No idea who *his* family is or where he came from.” Annoyingly, she began to heave herself up, just when Kate was eager to hear more.

Good manners compelled Kate to rise and help the old lady to her feet. And by the time she’d passed her walking stick and said goodbye, the moment for further questions had passed.

Ten minutes later, having refused with a shudder the attendant’s invitation to bathe in the pool below, Kate sallied forth again to find something else to do.

However, without friends in Blackhaven, there was very little to occupy her. She’d already visited the art gallery yesterday. It showed largely sea views, paintings of Braithwaite Castle and a few portraits of children, dogs, and horses. One or two of them were very fine, but Kate felt she could have improved on most of them herself. They certainly didn’t entice her back for another look just yet.

There was an ice parlor, like a miniature Gunther’s which she’d always enjoyed in London, and a couple of coffee houses occupied by an interesting mixture of gentlemen from all walks of life, and even by one or two females, though none of them was unaccompanied. Kate wondered if she felt strong enough to brave another taboo today and elected to leave it until she was truly bored.

Instead, she went for a walk around the town, which she didn’t really know despite having stayed at Braithwaite Castle in the spring. It proved to be a quaint, pleasant place on the whole, despite its rapid expansion which seemed to be managed with taste. And if she occasionally imagined shadows lying in wait at quiet corners, she supposed that was inevitable after last night. It didn’t mean she had to hide in her room in fear of men who had surely already fled Blackhaven.

She walked past St. Andrew’s Church, with only a faint pang of disappointment at not sighting the intriguing curate. She dawdled

around the market and the harbor, where she learned from a cheerful sailor that there were to be French prisoners delivered the following day by the famous—or infamous—Captain Alban, who'd helped to capture them and was apparently doing this further favor for the Royal Navy.

She went on through respectable residential streets and glimpsed others rather less salubrious—where she guessed it would be unwise to walk wearing silk. So she followed two neatly dressed women of the lower orders up another street leading back toward High Street.

The women entered a gate on the left, which surprised Kate since a line of somewhat unsavory characters snaked out of the gate and down the street. She couldn't resist glancing in the open gate as she passed. A small yard led to a ramshackle building with its doors wide open. A horse and cart stood to one side, the horse contentedly guzzling from a nose bag. Some kind of manufactory, she guessed. And perhaps these poor souls were looking for work here.

Kate refused to avoid them, although she was careful to carry her reticule on her outside arm. A few of the men grinned at her. One or two tipped their ragged hats. None of them addressed her or threatened her in any way. Until someone fell at her feet, blocking her path and forcing her to an abrupt halt.

Another man, who'd almost fallen with him, yelled, "Jackie!" in a mixture of despair and frustration and dropped to one knee, trying to haul him upright again. "We're going in, Jackie, the line's moving. Up you get, man."

The fallen man had one wooden leg and clothes so tattered as to be hardly worthy of the name. He also reeked of alcohol, and his friend's efforts to make him stand were doomed to failure. If he wasn't dead drunk, he was simply dead.

"Sorry, ma'am, he don't mean no harm," his friend threw at her while he slapped the unconscious man ungentle on the cheeks. "Fool. If you don't wake up, you won't eat. Jackie!"

"Ah," Kate said, understanding at last. "You're queuing for food?"

"Just till we get back on our feet," the man said defensively.

"Of course," Kate said hastily. Under the man's astonished gaze, she knelt on the ground and took her smelling salts from her reticule. She never used them herself, but had always carried them as part of a lady's accoutrements. She supposed they weren't normally used for drunks of this class.

One whiff, however, had Jackie waving his hands in alarm. His friend caught them before he could touch her. "Oy, Jackie behave. The lady's helping you. But you got to get up or you'll get no dinner. Don't make me leave you here." He cast his eyes uneasily after the line which had almost disappeared through the gate now.

Jackie opened his dazed eyes, focused them on Kate and gave her an unexpected, singularly sweet smile. It provided a hint of the man he'd once been. It also gave her a glimpse of true suffering. Shame hit her in the stomach.

She patted his shoulder awkwardly.

"Bless you lady, don't touch the varmint, he's filthy," objected the friend.

"There you are, Sergeant," said another, very different voice, and Kate's gaze flew up to find none other than Mr. Grant the curate, crouching down by the fallen man. He didn't look at her. "Your wound playing up again?"

Jackie nodded. It warmed Kate that Grant allowed him this dignity.

Without fuss, the curate got an arm under Jackie's waist and hauled him upright without any help. That done, he held him up with one arm, and offered his free hand to Kate.

She met his gaze and something new fizzed inside her, like a thousand tiny champagne bubbles. She took his hand and rose to her feet. Jackie's friend had taken the opportunity to run after the others.

Kate asked bluntly, "Will he be allowed a meal in this state?"

"Of course," Grant said, walking forward to the gate.

"Are you sure?" she insisted, trotting after them.

Jackie grinned at her. "Course he is. He's the captain."

"Captain of the kitchen," Grant said deprecatingly. "We provide meals for whoever needs them, twice a week if we can."

"Who is *we*?" she asked lightly.

"Volunteers from the church."

Since they were at the door of the building, she waited to be invited inside. But he only delivered up Jackie to a much burlier looking helper and turned to face her. "Many of them are old soldiers, invalided out of our local regiment and left with nothing. Some with no means of earning."

"It's not just the pain of his wound that makes him drink," Kate said in a small voice.

"No."

"You called him Sergeant."

"It brings him back to himself. Sometimes. Thank you for helping him. I'm afraid he has dirtied your dress."

"I have another," Kate said vaguely, thinking of Jackie's missing limb which could never be replaced. She refocused to find Grant's steady, compelling gaze on her face. Warmth seeped under her skin.

He said, "May I escort you to wherever you're going?"

"Of course not. You are busy here, and my reputation will not stand being seen with a gentleman while wearing a dirty gown."

"Unless the gentleman is the curate," he suggested.

"I suspect you have a very unrealistic idea of how your congregation regards you."

"Well, then you must hide," he said solemnly, walking toward the waiting horse and cart. He lifted the tarpaulin invitingly.

Her lips twitched. "Are you serious?"

"It's either that or be seen in my company."

They were hardly the only two options open to her, but she forbore to point it out. She recognized a challenge when she heard one. He didn't believe she'd do it. He imagined he was manipulating her into accepting his escort.

She regarded him, considering. "Do you think it will cause less talk—about either of us—if you empty me out of the cart in front of the hotel?"

"Of course not," he said promptly. "I'll deliver you round the back."

"Of course you will," she murmured. "Well, if you think you can make that beast move, by all means, do your worst."

And she advanced on the cart, fully intending to haul herself up, unaided. At least she had the satisfaction of having finally surprised him. She could see the uncertainty in his eyes, and then his breath of laughter. He moved, intercepting her before she could touch the sides of the cart.

"Surely you can't mean to stop me after arousing all my hopes?" she mocked.

"Oh no, I merely mean to help you up." Before she could object, if she truly meant to, he placed firm hands on her waist and lifted her easily to a sitting position on the cart with her legs dangling down.

Her breath caught. His eyes held hers, and he didn't at once release her waist. His fingers seemed to burn through the thin fabric of her pelisse and gown.

"I'm joking you," he confessed. "I wanted to see how far you would go."

She drew up her legs, pulling away from him. "You'd better hurry," she observed as she arranged herself under the tarpaulin. "I can tell you are in demand here."

For an instant he didn't move, then she heard his breath of laughter as he covered her up. A moment later, the cart creaked as he climbed up on the front to drive, and the horse began to amble forward.

I must be very, very bored, she thought as her shoulders began to shake with silent laughter.

His voice, sounding muffled through the tarpaulin, said, "Are you not afraid to walk alone after what happened last night?"

"No," she said, not entirely truthfully. "I won't be kept indoors by such ruffians."

"I like your spirit," he said. "And yet it terrifies me. You do know you've just climbed into a cart that belongs to neither of us, and are now completely at the mercy of a stranger you met less than twenty-four hours ago? A stranger who, moreover, was present when you were attacked. You, my lady, are reckless to a fault."

"Nonsense," she said, steadying herself with her hand as the cart bumped over something in the road. The horse clopped placidly on. "You are not a stranger. You are the curate."

"You mean you asked someone?" There was a pleased smile rather than a scold in his voice.

She opened her mouth to deny it, with suitably wry humor, before she remembered that actually, she had. "You see? I am not so big a fool as you imagine."

He didn't reply. From the noises outside the tarpaulin, she imagined they were already in High Street. She could hear the clop of other horses, human voices, and wheels passing her by.

She hung on tightly as they swung around another corner, and then another. The horse slowed and eventually stopped at Grant's gentle command. Warily, she lifted a corner of the tarpaulin, but could make out nothing. She almost jumped when it suddenly pulled back and Grant lifted her down in a rush.

There was something oddly exciting about his hold, perhaps the unexpected strength of his arms or the firm warmth of his grip. He stood very close to her, a smile of pure fun just dying in his eyes. Since her stomach showed a tendency to melt, she hastily looked around her. It was a wooden shelter of some kind, with a roof and two sides. It was empty save for herself, Grant, and the horse and cart, but she could hear distant sounds of activity, rhythmic chopping, and the clattering of pots and crockery. Voices murmured, with others shouting over the top.

"Where are we?" she murmured.

"It's an unloading area for the kitchen. Just walk straight out of here and through the door directly opposite. No one will notice you."

"Something tells me you speak from experience, sir. I don't now know which of us is less sane. There was no need for any of this."

"Tell me you didn't enjoy it."

Laughter surged up. "You are, without doubt, the strangest curate I ever met."

"I don't imagine you meet very many."

"Trust me, you stand out among thousands," she said dryly.

His lip quirked. "I wish that were true."

"Why?"

“Because I like you,” he admitted. “And I wish you to like me.”

She wasn't used to flirting outside back kitchens. That must have been why nerves seemed to dive through her stomach. But at least she managed to respond. “Oh, I like you, Mr. Grant. I thought I made that plain last night.”

“Do you like me enough to come to church on Sunday?”

“Do you want to save my soul again?” she asked flippantly.

“No, I want to *see* you again. I don't believe there's anything wrong with your soul.”

She laughed, pulling away at last. “But then, we're strangers, and you haven't known me a day. Goodbye, Mr. Grant.” And as directed, she walked out of the covered area and straight through the kitchen door.

Chapter Three

KATE YAWNED OVER her morning hot chocolate and leaned back into the comfortable pillows.

“What is today’s excitement, again?” she enquired of Little.

“Only the French prisoners being brought ashore,” the maid replied. Her eyes gleamed. “From Captain Alban’s ship.”

Kate had heard of Captain Alban, of course, a merchant captain with a mysterious piratical past, so it was rumored. In the last couple of years, he had taken on the French in quite dashing ways—running the French blockades, rescuing British prisoners from the French and Spanish coasts, and even joining in sea battles. A curious character she would be interested to meet. On the other hand, watching some poor, chained sailors being handed from one prison to the next wasn’t high on the list of Kate’s pleasures.

“What are the alternatives?” she asked.

“This morning? A visit to the pump room and the bath house. Or the gallery. Or the circulating library. Again.”

Kate sighed. She hadn’t finished the book she’d borrowed from the library yesterday afternoon. She looked forward with longing to the arrival of her horses. When she could ride, she could at least see more of the country.

“Very well,” she said. “Let us go and gawp at Captain Alban and hope his prisoners are not wretched enough to lower my spirits.” She took a sip of chocolate. “Although he might send some underling on such a dull task and then we shall be disappointed.”

“But the soldiers of the 44th will be there to take the prisoners,” Little said eagerly. “I hear the whole town will turn out to watch.”

Kate’s stomach gave a funny little flutter. Would the curate be above such a spectacle? Although she would not involve him in her affairs, she was far from averse to seeing him again. She liked his easy manners and his unexpected wit. In fact, he intrigued her as few men did these days, not least, she suspected cynically because he didn’t try to seduce her, despite admitting to liking her. The man was a challenge.

And, she acknowledged, sipping her chocolate, a mystery. A highly attractive mystery in clergyman’s clothes. A clergyman, forsooth! She’d never encountered one of the species quite like him. The ambitious, well-born ones who occasionally crossed her social path,

she generally dismissed as hypocrites. The poorer ones, dependent on the favor of her family or Crowmore's, tended to be obsequious and occasionally pitiful. There was certainly nothing obsequious or pitiful about Mr. Grant! Or hypocritical. He was, in fact, that rarity, a kind man who was not remotely boring.

Yet...

He talked and fought without flinching, amused her, ignored her reputation—and his own—and he made no assumptions. He was a novelty, and wicked Kate Crowmore loved nothing more. Who else would have smuggled her back to her hotel in a cart because her dress was dirty?

Laughter bubbled up once more. Of course that hadn't been his reason any more than it was hers. He liked her. It wasn't flirtation as she understood it. It was a lot more ... exciting.

She set down her cup and saucer. "The turquoise dress, I think, Little, don't you?"

An hour later, she sallied forth from the hotel and walked to the end of High Street and along to the docks. Annoyingly, the hair at the back of her neck prickled, a continued response to the recent attack that she couldn't quite squash, despite the daylight and the safe throng of people around her.

And, of course, Little trailed in her wake, more because the maid was desperate to see the spectacle than because Kate wished to pander to her own fears, let alone the town's sense of propriety.

It was easy to follow the flow of people from all classes who came to the harbor to jeer at the fallen enemy, and it wasn't far.

Blackhaven Harbor, while pretty against the backdrop of surrounding hills and rugged cliffs, wasn't suitable for larger vessels. According to the same friendly fisherman she'd spoken to yesterday. He pointed out Captain Alban's ship anchored beyond the harbor and the two boats full of prisoners being rowed ashore toward the harbor steps.

An officer and about ten soldiers from the local regiment were waiting to greet them, resplendent in their red coats with gleaming swords and buttons. And watching the spectacle, the town gentry and visiting ladies and gentlemen of quality rubbed shoulders with tradesman, shopkeepers, clerks, fishermen and general riff-raff. Kate found the whole scene pleasantly anonymous; for once, *she* was not the spectacle.

It gave her opportunity, while the boats of prisoners drew nearer, to scan the crowd for any sign of her attackers. Even if they'd remained in Blackhaven, she didn't think they'd be foolish enough to show their faces in daylight, since Mr. Grant was also bound to recognize them ... if he was here.

Finding a vantage point on a rocky step by the harbor wall, she felt the ripple of excitement as the crowd pointed out the man presumed to be Captain Alban himself in the first boat, a tall, straight individual with his hat pulled low over his forehead.

"He doesn't look like a pirate to me," a child close to Kate said doubtfully.

"That's 'cause he isn't one anymore," a slightly older companion explained.

As the first boat approached the steps, the captain stood up and leapt nimbly ashore, while one of the sailors threw a rope to a soldier to tie the boat in place. The crowd quieted, listening avidly.

The officer waiting for him at the top of the stairs greeted him with a click of the heels and a bow. "Captain Alban?"

Alban nodded curtly.

"Major Doverton of the 44th," the officer introduced himself.

Alban handed over some documents, presumably concerning his prisoners, and cast a quick glance at watching crowd around the harbor. Which is when Kate noticed Mr. Grant standing to the other side of the steps.

He wore a sober suit of black, as befitted his calling, and in the light of day his lean, handsome face still seemed almost ascetic. Beyond that, he looked nothing like a curate, or any other clergyman of her acquaintance. His hair was just a little wild, his dark eyes and expressive mouth ready to smile as he greeted people with a nod or a few words. However, behind that apparent openness, she was sure he kept secrets.

The old lady at the pump room had been right. Despite his good works, he seemed more a man of the world than of the cloth. And yet he'd stepped back from her boldness on the night of the attack, even though everything about him had betrayed his temptation. For once, she might have meant her offer.

Her stomach gave a little roll of excitement. She looked forward to whiling away a few minutes of the morning with a little more banter. However, his attention appeared to be on the prisoners being nudged up the steps by the sailors.

The prisoners' hands were bound, their shoulders slumped in defeat. Some wore the signs of injury, although their wounds appeared to have been tended and bandaged. At least they bore no obvious signs of ill treatment in captivity.

A hiss of hatred swelled among the crowd. A few ladies affected fear of such monsters, which Kate found merely annoying. They were hardly threatening.

The first boat crew, having unloaded all their prisoners, untied and rowed away to make room for the second boat. Idly, Kate glanced

once more at Grant, to see if he'd noticed her yet. After all, she stood in a prominent position, above the heads of most of the crowd.

The curate was staring down at the disembarking captives. His body was still, his lips parted in something very like shock.

But she might have imagined it, for an instant later, his head came up once more as he scanned the crowd, and found her at last.

His smile was spontaneous enough to lift her heart. And it was a devastating smile. Butterflies soared in her stomach in a way she hadn't known since before her marriage. *Dear God, the women of this town, young and old, must be hurling themselves at his feet.*

Kate was too used to her power over men to feel any astonishment that he began to stroll through the crowd toward her. It was her own quickened pulse that surprised her.

The last of the captives staggered ashore, and to the clear disappointment of the crowd, Captain Alban bade a curt farewell to Major Doverton.

"Watch out for the fair one," he advised, his voice drifting clearly on the breeze as he nodded to the prisoner at the back of the line. "He looks angelic but he'll turn on you like a savage if you give him an inch."

"Understood," the major said cheerfully, and ordered his men to begin the march in Kate's direction.

She watched them rather than Grant. A surge of pity welled up in her, not just for the French captives, but for those British detained in France, and for the wounded and dead on both sides. Such a huge thing as war only touched people like her at moments like these.

As though seeking someone in the crowd, Grant walked carelessly backward a few steps, and bumped into the prisoner at the end of the line. They both stumbled, and then Grant jumped away again with a sheepish apology to the soldier at the back. The soldier merely shrugged and grinned.

It seemed the distraction was just what the captive had been waiting for. Without warning, he sprinted straight toward Kate. Her heart thudded once, paralyzing her, but the prisoner veered at the last moment and vaulted over the railing, straight into the water below.

Women screamed and men shouted. Some of the soldiers ran toward the railings, until in fury, Doverton ordered them back to guard the remaining prisoners. He himself ran forward, shouting to Alban's boat and pointing out the desperately swimming prisoner, whose hands were clearly free.

Kate's lips parted involuntarily, her gaze seeking Grant in quick, surely impossible suspicion. The curate jumped up beside her on the rock, gazing with clear consternation after the escaping prisoner. Doverton shouted again to Alban, who, however, didn't even change

direction. His responsibility for the prisoners had ended, and he was obviously not going to put himself out. However, he seemed to be looking in Kate's direction. Or in Grant's.

Kate stared up at the frowning curate. "You did this," she whispered in amazement.

*

GRANT, DEVOUTLY HOPING no one else had made the connection, conjured up a sigh. "Sadly, I seem to have given him the opportunity. I expect he'll drown now, poor fellow." But it was hard to drag his gaze away from the water, where the prisoner seemed to have vanished, perhaps unconscious, having knocked his head against the rocks...

He forced himself to straighten. "Well, the fun appears to be over. Major Doverton will march the other twenty to their prison. The mysterious Captain Alban will return to his trade. Might I escort you anywhere?"

The sultry dark eyes regarded him with confusion, and in spite of everything, his heart twisted because she would never trust him now. She might not have seen how, but she knew he'd freed the prisoner. And he could say nothing until he knew what the devil Cornelius had been doing there, and if he lived.

His heart twisted harder.

"Only if you answer my questions," Lady Crowmore drawled. "Honestly."

She was indeed full of surprises.

"I will try," he said, unwisely.

"Then I would like to walk on the beach toward Blackhaven Cove." She began to walk in that direction.

Grant, who more than half expected the escaped prisoner to wash up on the rocks between the harbor and the cove, had planned to walk there himself once the excitement was over.

Two of the soldiers still peered over the harbor wall, searching, rifles aimed at the water. Alban's boats were rowing toward his ship, and the sailors paid no attention whatsoever to the lost captive.

Don't be dead. It was all he could think, as he walked blindly after Lady Crowmore and her maid.

"You are quiet this morning," the lady observed at last.

They were walking side by side. Grant, who was amazed she still spoke to him at all, suspecting him as he did, could only summon the faintest smile in response.

"One would think," Lady Crowmore said, "that you have had a shock."

"I have," he admitted.

"Did you cut the Frenchman's ropes?" she asked bluntly.

"I cut the prisoner's ropes," he admitted with care.

Her eyes narrowed, as if she noticed the nice distinction. "Why?"

"It seemed the right thing to do."

"Because he was the most troublesome? According to the man I took to be Captain Alban."

"No," Grant replied honestly.

"And you had no inclination to free any of the other prisoners?"

"None, though I suppose I feel sorry for the brutes."

She halted at the head of the path. "Then why that one?"

Grant licked his dry lips. "He isn't French."

She frowned. "Then what was he doing with a gaggle of French prisoners of war?"

"I have no idea."

"Shouldn't you have found out before you freed him?"

"Possibly," Grant said vaguely. He rubbed his forehead, then offered his arm to Lady Crowmore. Again, he was surprised when she took it.

"Who is he?" she asked.

He shook his head. "It isn't my place to tell." He drew in his breath. "Listen. I don't believe my action has caused any harm to our country. If I'm wrong, and if ... if he's still alive, I'll hunt him down myself and deliver him to Major Doverton."

"How will you find out?" she challenged.

Something moved among the rocks. Deliberately, he didn't look but continued down the path. "Oh, I'll find out," he assured her. "All news comes to me at the vicarage."

He sat down on the nearest rock, and under her amused gaze, pulled off his boots and stockings.

"Join me," he invited. "No one will see."

"Can your reputation withstand being caught running barefoot on the beach with the wicked Widow of Crowmore?" she inquired.

"Why do you call yourself wicked?" he asked, as she leaned against the rock beside him and allowed the disapproving maid to remove her shoes. She had enchantingly slender ankles and slim, elegant little feet.

"It's the judgement of the world," she said lightly. "And in truth, it gives me a certain cachet. Or did. Avert your gaze," she added sardonically, her hand on her stockinged ankle, "lest you become inflamed."

He let out a choke of laughter. If only she knew he was already inflamed, despite everything else. He rose, picked up his boots, and ran across the sand away from her, trying to get his wayward desires

under control, while his past fought with his present.

She didn't run after him. But when he swerved back the way he'd come, she was striding in his wake, as graceful barefoot as she'd been in the ballroom. Or on that ridiculous cart.

"You really *are* the strangest curate," she observed as he slowed and turned to walk with her, his boots dangling from one hand. The maid trotted after both of them, stumbling a little in the sand. "What do your parishioners make of your very odd behavior?"

"They've already decided I'm eccentric, but fortunately they seem to like me. So far."

"I expect you charm them," she murmured. "You are very charming."

He cast her a quick smile. "For a curate."

"Of course. Heaven forfend anyone actually regard you as a *man*."

He glanced at her. "Would you rather I were not a clergyman?"

As if startled, she met his gaze, searching. "No." She sounded surprised. "I just don't come across many priests who flirt with me. You, sir, are a novelty."

"Is that good?"

"So far."

He let a few moments go by in silence before he said, "I like to help. I would help you if I could."

"You can't," she said lightly. "But I thank you for the thought."

"You asked the men who attacked you who sent them. As if you expected them. As if you knew they were more than mere footpads."

She shrugged. "Blackhaven is not known for footpads."

"Who do you think sent them?" he pursued.

The silence stretched so long that he was sure she wouldn't answer. Then her breath seemed to catch and she said, "My late husband, of course."

He blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Her laughter held more than a hint of mockery. "I thought the Church believed in life after death."

"Not quite like that. How could your husband hurt you from beyond the grave?"

"With his tools here on earth," she said flippantly. "More precisely, his heirs." She held his gaze, doubt and something very like despair in her beautiful eyes, catching at his heart. Then she looked away and laughed. "The world knows I married Crowmore for his money and for the generous settlement my father extracted from him. I keep that settlement for my lifetime. What's more, I have control of my children's fortune—whatever small amount Crowmore left of that—until they are of age."

Grant frowned. "I didn't know you had children."

“I don’t. Yet.” She lifted her gaze once more, mocking and defiant. “But don’t you know where they found me, the morning Crowmore finally obliged the world and turned up his toes? With my lover. The new lord of Crowmore wants to make sure I don’t produce a bastard and pass it off as my husband’s.”

She meant to shock him, and she succeeded, though not for the reasons she clearly imagined.

He stopped, staring at her. “You expected this attack. You knew it would come. Christ, can your own family not protect you?”

She shrugged, as if she didn’t care. “It was they who hustled me out of London. They would have sent me to Ireland, since the wretched war makes going abroad more or less impossible, but I held out for the backwater that is Blackhaven.”

“Why?”

Her smile was twisted. “I thought I might have friends here.”

“You do,” Grant said.

A faint, almost confused frown tugged at her beautiful brow.

He smiled. “At the very least, an eccentric curate with a cloud over his patriotism. You need to be protected.”

With something very like wonder, she said, “By whom?”

“The town is full of retired soldiers looking for work.”

“Do you mean them to march up and down the passage in my hotel?”

“I was thinking of the street outside your hotel. If we caught any ruffians, we could connect them to their masters.”

She stared at him. “Why do you still want to help me? The scandal over my head is real. Even before Crowmore died, it was real. I’ve never been a good woman and I never will be. You should run before I destroy your career, too.”

“I’m perfectly capable of destroying my own career.”

Understanding seemed to dawn. She laughed, a musical and yet brittle sound. “But, of course! You are sincere, Master Curate. You have always been sincere. You *do* wish to save my soul!”

“Actually, I wish to marry you,” he said frankly. “But I’m a realist. I’ll settle for saving your body while God takes care of your soul.”

Chapter Four

KATE WAS NOT easily wrong-footed, but at those words, she stumbled, all but losing her balance in the shifting sand. His hand shot out and caught her elbow, steadying her. The warmth of his fingers burned through the fabric of her light, silk pelisse, reminding her there was more than one reason for her panic. But attraction to the very odd curate was the least of them.

"I'm happy to trust body and soul to God," she said tartly. "But marriage is strictly my own business now, and you may trust me when I tell you I am *quite* finished with it. I plan to enjoy being a widow."

"I hope you do," he murmured.

"Do what?" she asked suspiciously.

"Enjoy it. Come, let's sit in the cove and make ourselves respectable once more."

"No," she said perversely, although she'd once planned to suggest the same thing. His mention of marriage had rattled her. "I'm going to walk back along the beach to the town. Come, Little. Goodbye, Mr. Grant."

He paused, frowning. "At least let me walk back with you."

"No. I have an assignation at twelve," she lied.

Without waiting to see the effect of that, she tripped away from him, Little scampering along at her heels. She didn't put it past him to follow her anyway, but when she glanced back at last, he was climbing up the path to the road. Pique was an unusual sensation, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

Scowling, she tramped across the beach in silence for several minutes, before turning on Little. "Why would any reputable gentleman want to marry me?"

Little cast her a glance of disbelief. "Do you not *look* in your mirror?"

She waved that aside. "Gentlemen don't marry beauty, real or imagined. They marry land, fortunes, portions." And pure reputations.

"There you are, then. You have all of those."

That didn't make her happy either. She didn't want to think such worldly matters weighed with her charming curate. Any more than she wanted to believe he was some traitor serving the French. And yet, both could be true. For two days, she'd had to fight against the instinct to trust him. And today, despite the escaped prisoner, she'd

told him some of her troubles. He hadn't doubted her. Yet now she doubted the reasons behind his desire to help.

If he'd only wanted her body, she might have given it, and gladly. He already had a powerful effect on her that she couldn't account for beyond his good looks and lean, highly desirable person. If only he hadn't mentioned marriage.

She'd never conducted a flirtation with a clergyman before, real or rumored. With Tristram Grant, it would have to be completely secret so that it didn't damage his position here, and... Dash it, why was she even considering such a thing? He wanted marriage, which she'd never give.

Or he *said* he wanted marriage. Why would he lie? Was it just a throw away joke? Her stomach gave a sickening lurch. Or was he trying to buy and keep her silence about the French prisoner?

The unpleasant thought stayed with her all the way back to the hotel, where the receptionist informed her a gentleman waited for her in the coffee room. He'd even left a card so that she could decide whether or not to see him. Her heart in her mouth, she took the card and glanced at it.

Bernard Muir, Esq.

She didn't know if she was more relieved or disappointed. Not Mr. Grant. Not even one of the Crowmore clan, thank God.

On impulse, she sent Little ahead to their rooms and turned and walked into the coffee room. A couple of gentlemen looked up from a distant table but she ignored them as young Bernard Muir leapt to his feet in front of her.

"My lady!" he greeted her enthusiastically.

She gave him one languid hand, which he bowed over punctiliously.

"Will you join me in a cup of coffee?" he asked eagerly, although with something of the air of a puppy who expects to be kicked.

"With pleasure," Kate replied, seating herself while a waiter emerged from behind a plant pot and poured coffee into the waiting empty cup.

"I tried to speak to you further at the ball on Thursday," Bernard said. "But you didn't see me, and then you vanished!"

In fact, she'd seen him perfectly clearly. She simply hadn't felt able to cope with the youthful adoration at that point. "I never stay long anywhere," she said carelessly.

"I wanted to express my condolences," he murmured, in the hushed voice one reserves for speaking of the dead.

"For Crowmore? Don't waste them on me," Kate said brutally. "I shan't miss him."

But instead of repelling him, her lack of proper feeling inspired a look of awe in his handsome young face. "Your honesty is enchanting."

"No, it's generally embarrassing, but I regard you almost as family, so you must put up with it. How are Lord and Lady Wickenden?"

The new Lady Wickenden was Bernard's sister, someone who might have been a friend had it not been for Kate's rumored past with her husband.

"Very well, I believe," Bernard replied. "They spent a month in Scotland, and another at Wickenden, but we expect them in Blackhaven next week."

"I look forward to that," Kate murmured.

"How long do you stay in Blackhaven?" Bernard asked eagerly.

"Until I get bored."

"I don't suppose..."

"You don't suppose what?" Kate prompted, tapping her toe on the floor.

"That you'd consider dining with me this evening?"

Kate considered him. "Are you inviting me to your home?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "I have a stepmother these days and a tiny brother to consider. I was thinking here in the hotel dining room."

"You have a stepmother to consider," Kate repeated sardonically.

"My house is my stepmother's," Bernard said. "My friends are my own choice."

"Then..." She paused, tapping one gloved finger against her teeth. Aside from relieving her boredom, it struck her she could pick Bernard's brain about the curate. "Then I accept your gracious invitation."

Bernard grinned with clearly surprised delight, and Kate finished her coffee before leaving him to his.

*

AS A RULE, Kate never encouraged the very young gentlemen who threw themselves at her feet. She found their clinging adulation irritating as well as boring—and besides, unless they were insolent, she could never quite shake off a sneaking pity for them. Therefore, she was generally dismissive, or even downright rude when they refused to take the hint.

When she'd stayed at Braithwaite Castle in the spring, Bernard Muir had been one of those starry-eyed devotees, and as usual, she'd discouraged him. A pang of guilt smote her as she walked down to the dining room that evening. She would just have to maintain a cool

distance and constantly emphasize her connection to the Keiths of Wickenden, his sister's new family. After all, Julia Keith was her greatest friend ... or had been before the scandal.

When she entered the dining room, Bernard was already waiting for her, his shirt points so fashionably high that he could barely turn his head, and the intricate folds of his cravat showing obvious signs of help. Her heart sank a little, for she didn't want him to make so much of the encounter. She even wondered if, for his own sake, she should retreat to her rooms and send him word she was unwell.

But at that moment, he caught sight of her and leapt to his feet. She didn't have the heart to humiliate him by walking away. Ignoring the stares of the other diners, she strolled between the tables and allowed him to take her hand for the briefest moment.

"So," she said, seating herself as he held her chair, "your stepmother has turned out not to be so wicked? Or at least actually to be your stepmother!"

Bernard grinned, "She's not so bad. Gillie made friends with her before the baby was born, and we all rub along pretty well. You must meet my little brother. He's a most superior infant."

"I'll take your word for it," Kate said hastily. "I am no judge of babies."

Bernard ordered dinner and wine and while they waited, Kate made civil conversation about mutual acquaintances and town gossip. By the time they began to eat, it was perfectly natural to say, "And you have a new vicar, I believe?"

"Oh no. He's Mr. Hoag's curate, really. Mr. Hoag is on an extended visit to London, so Mr. Grant has had to step up to the mark."

"Do you like him?" she asked carelessly.

"Grant? Yes, he's a great fellow. Never po-faced or disapproving. Mind you, I'm not a great one for church. But even Isabella—my stepmother—approves of him. He's already organized a hostel for the sailors, a charitable meal kitchen, and a sanctuary for poor women to stay while they get back on their feet."

"How very energetic! Where did this paragon come from? Who is he?"

Bernard shrugged. "No idea. Seems like a gentleman to me." He frowned. "More like Lord Braithwaite than Mr. Hoag, if you understand me."

"You mean he comes from a great family rather than merely respectable birth?"

"It's just an impression," Bernard said apologetically. "And not because he gives himself airs, because he doesn't."

"I wonder where he was before he came here? Presumably he's been in holy orders for some years."

Bernard frowned. "Don't know that he has. I'm sure Hoag said something before he came about him being inexperienced but well thought of. But he must be nearly thirty. Expect he did something else first."

Or *was* somewhere else first. Could he have come from France and somehow inveigled himself into the Church? Surely such a thing would be impossible. Taking on a curate was hardly like hiring a footman! Though even footmen came with references. In any case, why would he? What could a French spy possibly achieve in Blackhaven? The fortress ten miles along the road had only recently been made into a prison. And Alban's prisoners were the first ever to be landed in Blackhaven.

Grant had claimed the one he helped wasn't French. Kate wanted to believe that. And yet... If Grant was a danger, she couldn't keep this information to herself.

*

AS IT GREW dark, Grant was torn between waiting in the vicarage and going out to make sure Lady Crowmore was safe. In the end, he lit the fire in the back-book room on the ground floor, and left the window slightly open before seizing his hat and striding round to High Street.

A new coffee house had opened across from the hotel, so he took up a seat in the window and ordered coffee. From here, he could see the front door and the gentleman at the window table of the dining room.

"Spare a coin, sir," urged a voice beside him. A dirty-faced boy of about nine-years-old had sidled up to him, grinning expectantly.

"I've already spared you two," Grant said mildly. "You need to earn them first."

The boy leaned closer, bringing with him an unpleasant aroma of fish. "She's not gone out. Having dinner with a gentleman."

For a moment, Grant couldn't understand the raw emotion twisting through his stomach. He even wondered if he were taking ill before he recognized the cause as rare and quite unreasonable jealousy. He didn't know whether to chastise himself or just laugh.

Grant flipped the boy a penny. "Now, go home before your mother has to come looking for you." And before the proprietor, drawn by the smell of fish, noticed him and threw him out.

The hotel was busier now, with the arrival of several gentlemen he knew—mostly of the young and wild set, with a scattering of the older and not very much wiser. Grant suspected a private party in one of the hotel's back rooms, especially considering the women who entered either alone or on the arm of some young gallant.

They were not ladies of quality but at least one actress from the new theatre, and a few he didn't know but of a type he recognized, ladies of the demi-monde. A few years ago, Grant would have thoroughly enjoyed such a party. Now his only concern was that it provided possible opportunity for unsavory people to get to Kate Crowmore. Uneasily, he watched and waited.

Grant's patience, uncharacteristically brooding though it might have been, was soon rewarded by a glimpse of Lady Crowmore, walking past the table in the dining room window. Behind her came an eager young man he recognized as Bernard Muir.

Grant never judged people. But he couldn't prevent the tightening claw around his heart. There was a reason people called her wicked Kate. But taking a little comfort didn't make her wicked; it made her lonely. If that was what she was doing when she passed out of his sight.

The presence of the discreetly disreputable party in the hotel bothered him. He stood abruptly, dropping a couple of coins on the table for his coffee.

As he made his way out, he paused considerably beside a pair of retired soldiers who greeted him in friendly fashion. "Evening, Mr. Grant."

"Evening, gentlemen," Grant replied. "Tell me, have you noticed any ruffians hanging around the town in the last couple of days?"

"No more 'n usual," one replied.

"A few threatening fellows were hanging around the hotel the other night. Perhaps you'd keep your eyes peeled? I know you wouldn't let anyone get hurt if you could avoid it."

The men grinned. "Not unless we was doing the hurting."

Grant laughed as he was meant to, and sauntered outside and across the road to the hotel.

"Evening, Mr. Grant," Sparrow, the doorman, greeted him.

Grant nodded and crossed the foyer to the reception desk where a young man was directing a gentleman to the double doors at the back of the hall.

The young man turned at once to him. "Evening, Mr. Grant."

"I'm looking for Mr. Muir," Grant said, not entirely untruthfully.

"Through the double doors, sir, and straight across the hall."

"Thank you."

Grant found more or less what he expected. A large room fragrant with cigar smoke and brandy, and a lot of not entirely sober men playing cards and making witty conversation with the beautiful women who draped themselves around the tables, or over their arms.

Kate stood out at once. Seated at one of the tables, surrounded by admirers, she seemed to be playing hazard with a group of gleaming-

eyed gentlemen—and winning, judging by the little pile of money at her elbow. The banker, flushed with drink or loss, scratched his head and gazed at her, bemused. Ladies did not play hazard.

Bernard Muir, at another table, kept casting slightly anxious glances at her. No wonder. She looked incredibly beautiful, sparkling with life and vitality, and utter decadence.

She took Grant's breath away all over again.

Kate let out a peel of delighted laughter at the fall of her dice, and received another pile of sovereigns and bank notes.

"Mercy, Lady C!" someone exclaimed. "You're going to clean us all out."

"Come and let me drink champagne with you instead," said a gentleman at her shoulder.

"Oh, I have some here," Kate said. "Your health, gentlemen!" And raising her glass, she at last saw Grant watching her from between the tables.

For the tiniest instant, her dazzling smile froze, as if his presence disoriented her. Then she laughed and tilted her glass to him before taking a sip.

"Hit him again, Lady C," someone urged, clapping the banker on the shoulder.

"No, I'm finished with hazard," Kate pronounced. "I shall try something else." She stood, amidst the protests of all, even the banker, and swept her winnings so carelessly into her reticule, that she left a portion of them behind.

Forcing himself to be still, Grant made no move toward her. It was she who made her way to him, via several stops to greet men she seemed to know.

"Mr. Grant," she said at last. "Have you come to save my soul again?"

"In truth, I was more worried about your body. Your enemies could gain admittance to such an event all too easily."

"Then I shall snap my fingers in their faces. Champagne, Mr. Grant?"

"No, I thank you. I won't stay. Will you?"

"Of course," she said, patting her reticule. "I'm winning."

"Are you always so lucky?"

"No," she admitted. "Which is why I don't sit too long at the same table."

Grant blinked. "You believe you're being set up to be fleeced, and still you play with them?"

"It amuses me. Gaming is quite dull otherwise, don't you find?" She sipped her champagne and smiled at him over the rim of her glass. "Or is that also too satanic a pleasure for the curate?"

"Too expensive a one," he returned. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Her eyes darkened alluringly. "Of course. I always find the private alcoves, nooks, and crannies immediately."

"For use or avoidance?" Grant enquired shrewdly.

She laughed, accepting his proffered arm and strolling with him toward the curtained windows. "Both," she admitted. "But the latter more often than most would believe. If you must know, I fight my own reputation more frequently than is perfectly comfortable."

"Then why come to a party like this?"

She shrugged. "Mr. Muir invited me."

"You didn't need to accept."

"Why wouldn't I? He knows all the best card parties."

"Are you so bored?"

"Of course, I am," she drawled. "The ladies of the town take it upon themselves to cut me rather than fawn upon my title and position as they did before. What else can I do but socialize with their husbands and sons? And fathers."

She twitched back a curtain to reveal a deep bay with a curved window seat and walked through without a backward glance, leaving Grant to close the curtain behind them.

"And card-sharps," he pointed out.

"They're the fun part."

"Poor Bernard."

"Are you going to tell me off for leading him on and dropping him?"

Grant shook his head. "No. I came to make sure you were safe. You must be careful."

She spread her arms, her eyes challenging and confident. "And yet here I am, alone with a man in a private alcove."

"A man whom you know perfectly well is no threat to you."

"Of course, the threat is from me," she mocked. "What will your devoted female flock make of this assignation? And don't be modest. I know you have one."

"An assignation or a flock?" he asked with a quirk of his lips.

"Both," she replied. She sighed. "But I'm teasing you. I've seen no sign of our ruffian friends. I believe they must have fled before your mighty fists. How are they, by the way?"

Quite naturally, she took his hand, examining the healing abrasions on his knuckles. She wore no gloves, and her touch burned him.

"Well," he replied and deftly twisted his wrist, so that it was he who held her hand, hiding the ugly injuries.

Her gaze flew to his, in clear surprise, but she didn't withdraw her

hand.

"Think of your flock," she said with light mockery. "And your reputation."

She really thought it would be enough to scare him off. It made him smile. "I'd rather think about you," he said.

Without taking his eyes from hers, he raised her hand, then slowly dropped his gaze to her slightly parted lips and then her shapely, slender fingers. She shivered, but still made no effort to withdraw. He turned her hand, brushing her palm with his thumb and then lowered his head, kissing the delicate veins of her wrist.

Her pulse raced under his mouth. She wasn't indifferent. But more than that, he'd wriggled under the veil of her act. He'd surprised her, and for once she didn't know what to do. He wanted to snatch her in his arms, devour her with kisses.

Her eyes widened, but still she didn't pull back. He left her wrist and dropped another kiss in her trembling palm before straightening.

"I mean it, you know. I want to marry you."

She tugged her hand free at last, a ragged, almost jerky movement, quite unlike her usual grace. "I would not be so unkind. To either of us." She turned away, reaching for the curtain.

"Be careful," he said urgently.

She let out a breath of laughter. Acting again. "My dear Mr. Grant," she said huskily. "It is you who must be careful."

The curtain fell behind her, leaving him alone. He breathed deeply, calming himself and his urgent body. More than ever, she intrigued him, for although she might be an accomplished flirt, her response to his mild advances was not that of woman experienced in dalliance.

A few moments later, he left the alcove. He was just in time to see Kate sweeping from the room, alone. He didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed.

*

GRANT KNEW BEFORE he opened the book room door. Perhaps it was the distinctive smell of the sea or of wet clothes steaming before a fire.

Taking a deep breath, he walked in.

The fair French prisoner sat shivering before the fire with his knees under his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs. His face was bruised, with a healing cut on his lip. He looked up and their eyes locked.

Grant closed the door and walked to the sofa. Pushing aside the cushion, he picked up the breeches, socks, and shirt he'd hidden there earlier, and threw them on the floor beside his visitor.

The shivering man twisted his lips into a half-sneering smile.

"Then it's true. You really are the vicar."

"Curate," Grant corrected, while his visitor tore off his wet and ragged clothes. Before he could don the dry ones, Grant strode forward and turned him roughly toward the light. A suppurating wound splayed across his left shoulder.

"It's healing." He pulled the shirt over his head.

"No, it isn't," Grant said flatly. "Is the ball still in there?"

"No, Alban's butcher dug it out of me."

"It's infected."

"No, it isn't."

Grant regarded him with all the old, familiar frustration. "Cornelius, how the devil did you become a *French* prisoner of war?"

"Well, I couldn't tell the French I was English, could I? They'd have strung me up. Even after the British captured us. My only hope was to escape once we landed in Britain."

"Glad to oblige," Grant said politely.

"Bit risky," Cornelius allowed, looking around him for a coat. Grant took his off and threw it to him without a word. Cornelius caught it in his good arm and flung it loosely about his shoulders. "Did no one see you cut the rope?"

"At least one," Grant admitted. "But so far at least, she hasn't told."

"One of your devoted flock?" Cornelius mocked. "What influence you must enjoy in this backwater."

"You'd better hope so," Grant retorted. "For both our sakes."

"Oh, I do, I do." Cornelius eased himself onto the sofa. "Are you hiding here, Tris? Does my father know where you are?"

Grant shrugged. "I doubt it."

"Let's hope not. He's a vindictive old bastard."

"Oh, I rather think your crime eclipses mine by now."

"Unless I redeem myself damned quickly. Which *you* can't. What on earth possessed you to take orders?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Probably not," Cornelius agreed. "On the other hand, who was that ravishing woman with you on the beach?"

"None of your business." Grant dragged one hand through his hair. "Look, you need to lie low here until I get a doctor to look at that wound. Fortunately, the vicar and his family aren't here and they've taken the servants with them. But there is a woman who comes in to clean each day and cook a meal. From tomorrow, you'll need to avoid her. For now, I'll bring you some food, and park you in a bedchamber while I fetch the doctor."

"HIS FEVER IS growing severe," Dr. Lampton said, "no doubt from the infected wound."

"It's not infected," Cornelius said weakly.

"Of course it isn't," Lampton said peaceably. "Go to sleep."

Grant followed the doctor from the bedchamber and closed the door, leading the way to the vicar's drawing room where he poured them both a glass of brandy. "How bad is it?" he asked abruptly. "Should I be summoning his family?"

"Not yet. The infection is mild, as if some care was taken with the wound in the first instance, whatever happened later. I believe he has a chill on top of it." Dr. Lampton accepted the brandy and sat on the nearest chair before he fixed Grant with his perceptive eyes. "Who the devil is he?"

"An old friend," Grant said vaguely. "He can't stop getting into trouble, but there's no harm in him." Too restless to sit, he paced to the window and downed his brandy. "I'm afraid I need your discretion."

"You have it," Lampton said at once. "But I'd love to know more. For my own curiosity, not the world's."

"And I'd tell you if the story were mine."

"Ah well, it gives me something to look forward to learning in the future. Do you plan to keep his presence secret during tomorrow evening's soiree?"

Grant blinked. "Tomorrow's what?"

"Your fundraising, musical evening."

Grant groaned, smacking his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Damnation, I forgot all about it! I gave Mrs. Winslow and Mrs. Fenton free rein to organize things, so it slipped my mind. But no, I will *not* be presenting Mr. Cornelius! Will you and Mrs. Lampton join us?"

"Lord no, my definition of hell," Lampton said cheerfully.

"It's in a good cause."

"Then I'll stump up now to be free of further harassment. Did you hear about the escaped prisoner at Blackhaven Harbor?"

"I was there and saw it," Grant said, turning back toward the window.

"He had fair hair," Lampton observed. "By coincidence,"

Grant's gaze flew to the doctor's. He should have known better than to try to fool him. "There is no treason here," he said with difficulty. "I ask you to believe that."

"Oh, I do," Lampton said, placing his empty glass on the table and standing up. "I would not otherwise be drinking with you. Goodnight, Grant, and send for me if our patient worsens."

Chapter Five

KATE WONDERED IRREVERENTLY if she would burst into flames when she entered the holy precincts of a church for the first time in several years. All heads turned toward her, she might as well have been burning. Ignoring the stares, she took one of the last vacant places in the back pew and looked around her.

It was a pleasant little church, with beautiful stained glass and a little chapel to the side, dedicated, according to the notice on the wall, to sailors. And it was full, numbering local gentry, visitors, and ordinary townspeople among the congregation. Everyone chattered away cheerfully, even those who cast Kate baleful glances.

"She isn't even wearing black gloves!" exclaimed one affronted woman.

There was a ripple of muffled laughter and yet more quick, surreptitious glances thrown Kate's way. She paid them no attention, keeping her eyes fixed to the front of the church where Mr. Grant emerged, suitably robed in a plain black cassock. She didn't know if he'd heard the remark, or if he observed her presence, for she felt a sudden panic. She hadn't brought a prayer book and she'd forgotten the liturgy.

It turned out not to matter. Everything came back to her. Voices boomed in common prayer and soared in hymns, soothing with familiarity. But it was the sermon that made the greatest impression on her. Not just because of Grant's deep, oddly beautiful voice, or even the simple goodness of his words, mixed with a leavening humor that kept her genuinely intrigued and attentive. It was the reaction of those around her that she found most staggering. Everyone seemed to hang on his words, men, women, rich and poor. One girl at the end of Kate's pew even wept silently before raising her head proudly at the end as though determined to do better with her life. And yet his words were never judgmental or accusing, just thoughtful and curiously moving.

Kate swallowed as the final hymn began. She'd tried to blot it out, imagine the words of his sermon applied only to others, to those who cared. But it seemed she *did* care, for she felt suddenly overcome by shame at the hedonistic selfishness of her life. She hadn't hurt Crowmore—the man could not have been hurt by less than the death that finally took him—but neither had she forgiven him. The man

whom she'd promised to love, honor, and obey, forsaking all others...

If she'd been sitting on the end of a pew, she'd have slipped away at that point. She'd only come to see if he was a real priest. If he wasn't, he'd certainly learned more than the basics. And here she was, trapped and vulnerable.

So she didn't look at him as he walked down the aisle, to the door. Those local worthies with pews at the front of the church left first, and everyone piled out behind, waiting to have a word with Mr. Grant.

He helped these people, Kate realized, just by being among them. Just by listening to them, by treating the poor and damaged as human beings, not judging them by their faults or failings. Was that why she'd felt so drawn to him? Because she was more damaged, more in need, than any of them?

I'm not. I'm strong, stronger than Crowmore, than any of his family or mine. I look after myself.

Determinedly, she raised her head, fighting the urge to confide, to confess, to beg him to make her a better person. This man who'd come from nowhere and could even be a French spy.

When she could, she tried to duck quickly past a lady with an enormous hat, but with cursed timing the lady moved on, and unless Kate was prepared to bolt in an undignified manner, she was bound to shake hands with the curate.

"My lady," he greeted her with the same warmth he showed everyone. "I'm very glad to see you here." And yet surely his eyes were warmer when they looked at her. She bet everyone thought that.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I enjoyed your sermon. Goodbye."

But he retained her hand when she would have withdrawn it. And God help her, she liked his touch.

"Do you know about our musical soiree this evening?" he asked. "We're raising money for town charities, and you would be most welcome. Mrs. Winslow and Mrs. Fenton are acting as my hostesses for the evening. Perhaps you would even condescend to sing for us."

"Any condescension would be in listening to me," Kate said dryly. "Thank you for the invitation." And withdrawing her hand, she passed on, nodding civilly to anyone who caught her eye as she walked along the church path and out of the gate.

Of course, she had no intention of attending the ridiculous event. *Me? At a provincial church musical evening?* It hardly fit with the character she'd built for herself over the years. And yet, didn't she always do the unexpected? Didn't she always want to? In this case, she wasn't afraid of boredom, but of her unlikely attraction to the curate. She didn't even know if her suspicions were based on common sense or on the need to "de-perfect" him for her own safety.

Yet after the church service, how could she doubt him? How could

she doubt the man who had taken on four violent ruffians for her, before the prisoner incident?

Of course, in the cart conversation, he'd suggested he could have been part of the attack, setting himself up, perhaps as some sort of hero. And he had said he wanted to marry her, a most unequal marriage in the eyes of the world. She could have been expected to look more favorably on a hero than on an ordinary curate.

Only why would he want to marry her? There were wealthier and purer-hearted women in the world to ensnare. Besides, if it was true, why the devil would he point out the possibility to her?

So lost was she in speculation that it took her some time to notice the girl glaring at her as they approached each other from opposite ends of High Street. She was young, no older than seventeen, and very beautiful in demure sprig muslin. Although she looked vaguely familiar, Kate had no idea who she was.

She was escorted by a short, plump woman who might have been a governess, apart from her somewhat strident voice, and by a middle-aged gentleman with a gold topped cane. However, the girl's attention was not on them but on Kate, so much so that the governess actually stopped in front of Kate, blocking her path.

"Is this one of your new friends, Jenny?" she asked, in a strong, local accent.

The gentleman with the cane ogled Kate, while the girl blushed a fiery red with mortification.

"Why, no, ma'am," she almost whispered. "We are not acquainted,"

The woman blinked at her in surprise. "Then what're you staring at her for?"

Clearly, the girl wished the ground to swallow her up. "Forgive my rudeness, your ladyship. We have a mutual acquaintance."

"Did I behave shockingly to them?" Kate drawled.

"Bless you, my lady," the older woman gushed. "She's just a child gawping at beauty. I'm Mrs. Smallwood of Kendal. This is my daughter Janet. And Mr. Dollen who has two mills over by Newcastle. And you are...?"

Kate considered her. She was more than capable of depressing the pretensions of people who sought to scrape acquaintance with her for their own ends. And Mrs. Smallwood was clearly an encroacher, a social climber of lowly birth who wanted her daughter to be a lady. But the daughter, although obviously mortified by the mother's impudent ill manners, had begun this whole encounter by glaring at Kate as though she'd stolen the child's favorite toy. Inevitably, Kate was intrigued.

"Katherine Crowmore," she said languidly. "And who is our mutual

acquaintance, Miss Smallwood?"

The girl almost whispered, "Mr. Muir."

Mrs. Smallwood scowled, casting a quick glance at Mr. Dollen as though to see how he took news of this male acquaintance. Kate began to understand. The girl, Janet, was in love with Bernard Muir—or at least imagined she was. But the mother preferred Mr. Dollen for her, no doubt because he had two mills near Newcastle and Bernard, although gently born, had little more than two pennies to rub together.

On the other hand, the speculative gleam in Mrs. Smallwood's eye told her the woman was not above using Kate to introduce her daughter to prospective husbands who were both gently born *and* rich. If she knew of Kate's scandalous reputation, it did not trouble her.

"Ah, yes. Bernard and his sister are practically family," Kate said carelessly, which is when she noticed that Mr. Dollen, while still ogling Kate, placed his hand in the small of the girl's back. It might have been a protective gesture, had Miss Smallwood not flinched.

That flinch unnerved Kate, transporting her back to her own girlhood when a very different, much older man had touched her and made her cringe, even while she'd let her parents bully her into marrying him. It was the way of the world. She'd given up a man she loved for one who made her flesh crawl. And the Smallwoods would make this child do the same.

"We should take tea together," Kate said abruptly to the girl. "Do you stay in Blackhaven?"

"At the hotel," Mrs. Smallwood replied. "For a few days. My health, you know—"

"Excellent," Kate interrupted, although she looked at the daughter rather than the mother. "Then the matter is easily arranged. Until then, goodbye."

*

ALTHOUGH KATE TRIED quite hard to talk herself out if, it was surely inevitable that she walked round to the vicarage that evening. Even then, she told herself it was to further investigate the mysterious curate, not because he excited and soothed her at once, not because she liked him. Though she might just ask him about Miss Smallwood if the opportunity arose.

A serving maid admitted her to the house with a curtsy, and took her pelisse before directing her to the drawing room. Kate followed the strains of indifferent music to an open door which revealed quite a large gathering for the size of the room.

She was inured to the sudden silence which greeted her arrival,

even to the audible whisper, “Who invited *her*?” And the inevitable, “Not even black gloves. The woman has no decorum.”

A trio of musicians played in one corner of the room, beside a pianoforte. A few rows of chairs had been set out, with a couple of sofas against the wall. A large, silver bowl graced the table at the back, where Mr. Grant stood. In the silence, he glanced across to her and smiled, the same, spontaneous smile he’d given her at the harbor, the one that seemed to turn her insides to liquid.

He murmured, “Excuse me,” to his companions and walked straight toward her as though no one else were in the room. “Lady Crowmore. I’m so glad you could come after all.”

He shook her hand with perfect civility. She might have imagined the swift, unnecessary caress of his thumb, or it might have been an apology for his guests.

“I’m sure you already know Mrs. Winslow.”

The local squire’s wife, and leader of Blackhaven society in the absence of the Countess of Braithwaite, exchanged distant bows with her. They’d met during Kate’s previous stay at the castle.

“We were just about to begin,” Grant said cheerfully. “The rules are simple. A coin in the bowl by way of entry, and from then on, another coin for each performance you like. Denominations of your own choice.”

“I’m sure I can manage that,” Kate said, going at once to the bowl.

By the time she turned back to the room, the music had ceased, the rows of seats were filled, and Miss Winslow stood nervously in front of the piano, ready to sing. An elderly lady sat down at the instrument and began to play. Kate seated herself on one of the sofas and prepared to be appalled.

Actually, it wasn’t too bad. Miss Winslow had a sweet voice, and the pianist provided a soft accompaniment. But the girl’s eyes followed Mr. Grant all the time she sang, as though desperately seeking his approval, or any signs of criticism.

Grant eased himself into the sofa beside her. “Worth a coin?” he murmured.

“Maybe even two. Will *you* sing?”

He grinned. “Lord, no. Bad enough they have to listen to me in church. Excuse me.” He stood and quietly left the room.

Miss Winslow’s face fell immediately, but her performance was greeted with much applause, and Kate duly added two more coins to the slowly filling bowl. This time, when she returned to her sofa, a gentleman sat beside her, making pleasant but innocuous conversation, as though they’d met before. Which they had, at Lady Braithwaite’s spring ball. Kate eventually placed him as Mr. Winslow, the squire. Since he had twinkling eyes, she responded accordingly

until it was time to put another coin in the bowl.

"Perhaps you sing, Lady Crowmore?" Mrs. Winslow asked in frosty accents. Kate suspected she wished her to perform and be humiliated by receiving lackluster applause and earning no coins.

"Oh, I did as a debutante of course," she replied. "But these days I leave the floor to younger and sweeter voices. What about you, Mrs. Winslow?"

Mrs. Winslow flushed. "Only for charity, of course."

"Oh, of course," Kate said at once. "Then if you think it will help the cause, I'm sure I can warble out some old tune or other."

The squire had again taken up position on her sofa, so she wandered out of the room, ostensibly in search of the cloakroom, in reality to find out where Grant had disappeared to.

At the foot of the stairs, her keen ears picked up some movement above. Impulsively, after only the briefest glance around her, she glided up the staircase and was drawn to a muffled murmur behind a closed door. Two murmurs, surely two separate male voices. And yet the curate supposedly lived alone here while the Hoags were away.

Which didn't mean he couldn't have visitors. Slightly shocked at her own behavior, Kate hurried back downstairs, and quietly re-entered the drawing room where a young lady visiting with her aunt was manfully murdering a Scottish air. Kate leaned against the wall, just inside the door, in order to make a quick escape if laughter overtook her.

A few moments later, Grant slipped back into the room and paused. For an instant, he met her gaze with a humorous expression of pain, hastily smoothed into one of appreciation as he faced the performer. Kate bit her lip.

Half-an-hour later, tea was served by Mrs. Winslow and Mrs. Fenton. Grant again left the room under pretense of looking for some more brandy for those gentlemen who wished to partake of something a little stronger than tea. Since the gentlemen already appeared to be helping themselves from a decanter beside the collection bowl, Kate suspected it was an excuse to pay another visit to the room upstairs. Who on earth was up there?

Her breath caught.

The French prisoner.

Suddenly, she was sure the man had swum around to Blackhaven Cove, had probably been there when she and Grant had walked there together. Perhaps Grant had even known it. She remembered him saying, "*All news comes to me at the vicarage.*" Had he actually been telling the Frenchman where to find him, where he'd be safe? Surely there had been no need to say *at the vicarage* to her?

Almost blindly, she accepted a cup of tea from Mrs. Winslow and

sat in the nearest chair. Grant re-entered the room.

"Tell me, Lady Crowmore," said the old lady beside Kate. "Is it no longer the custom in London to wear black in mourning?"

"For some, no doubt," Kate said flippantly, beginning to remove one glove. "I do my mourning on the inside." As the glove fell into her lap, she picked up a piece of fruit cake from her plate, thus revealing in all its glory, the black paint on her fingernails. She smiled.

An audible gasp went around the room. Kate wondered if she'd gone too far, but when she glanced defiantly at the curate, his lips were twitching. More surprisingly, Mrs. Winslow hid a smile behind her hand. Kate could see her eyes laughing over the top before she turned away under pretense of speaking to someone else. Her voice wasn't quite steady.

Well, who would have known it? The squire's wife has a sense of humor.

Kate finished her cake, and leisurely replaced her glove.

After tea, Mrs. Winslow announced that she had prevailed upon Lady Crowmore to sing. If the women present looked somewhat doubtful, it was noticeable that the men seemed to sit up straighter.

All that power over men, she thought sardonically, and still she'd married Crowmore. Still she was left in this intolerable position through another man's trickery. What the devil was it for?

She chose a short and simple traditional song that Miss Dundas at the pianoforte appeared to know, and sang it without fuss. Her audience looked surprised, as though they'd expected some kind of burlesque theatre act. Except Grant, who, by the door, watched her steadily, the faintest of smiles on his lips.

As expected, the applause from the men was enthusiastic, although that of the women seemed kinder than she'd imagined would be the case. Perhaps she was winning them over, despite her black-painted fingernails.

In fact, the only approval she really cared for seemed to be Grant's, which annoyed her so much she excused herself once more and, avoiding the cloakroom, ran upstairs to the room where she'd heard voices.

The sun was low now, and the passage was gloomier than before. She could hear no voices, but someone surely was rustling behind that door. She leaned closer to it to hear better—and without warning, it flew open.

A man stood there with his shirt half on and his shoulder bandaged. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and his expression was slightly dazed. He was youngish, perhaps in his early thirties, and his damp hair was very fair.

"Beautiful lady," he observed with apparent pleasure and stumbled

forward so that she made an instinctive grab for him. Between them they made an audible bump but at least she managed to hold him up.

"You're ill," she gasped. "You need to be in bed."

"Bored with bed. Alone." It was a brave attempt at a leer. Since he was clearly fevered, she didn't take it seriously, instead dragging him back into the room, which was indeed a bedchamber, and stumbling with him toward the bed. There, she let him tumble back onto the sheets before straightening and rolling her shoulder to ease it from his weight.

Fortunately, he'd landed more or less against the pillows, so she was able to help turn him and let him drink from the glass on the nightstand. Since there was a bowl of cold water and a cloth there too, she bathed his brow.

A shadow fell across the room. Her patient opened his eyes and smiled.

"Vicar," he said disparagingly, and Kate jerked her head toward the door.

"Curate," Grant said mildly, closing the door and walking into the room. "Lady Crowmore, you should not be attending this reprobate."

She dropped the cloth back in the bowl and watched him approach. "Because he's an escaped French prisoner?" she asked steadily.

"No, because he's an idiot."

"And not French," the prisoner insisted.

"You don't sound French," Kate acknowledged. There was relief in that. "Who the devil *are* you?"

"Cornelius," the prisoner answered, as though it should mean something to her.

Again, she looked at Grant. "And who exactly is Cornelius?"

Grant said nothing.

Cornelius laughed. "I'm his brother, of course."

Chapter Six

“HALF-BROTHER,” GRANT CORRECTED. “But all imbecile.”

“And you’re still a bastard,” Cornelius retorted, although somewhat feebly. His eyes were already closing.

“Please stay in bed this time,” Grant said.

“I don’t like to miss ... the fun,” Cornelius murmured, drifting away.

Grant raised his eyes to Kate. “You should go back before you’re accused of a secret tryst.”

“So should you.”

“In a few minutes. Go.”

She didn’t argue. He should, she supposed, be more offended by her trespassing in the private part of the house. Perhaps that was why she went without a fuss, pausing at the door to say only, “You have to explain now.”

He didn’t dispute that either, merely gave a distracted smile before turning his attention back to the sick man. His brother. No wonder he’d helped him escape.

✱

ALTHOUGH IT WASN’T quite dark as Kate walked back to the hotel alone, she found herself glancing constantly to right and left, peering into shadows and listening intently to every distant footfall. Some were not so distant. Quick, light footsteps followed her the whole way, stopped when she pretended to look in the hat shop window, and began again when she moved on. And big, rough looking men seemed to skulk in doorways close to the hotel, making her heart hammer. She carried her reticule in front of her, with one hand inside it, her fingers closed about the handle of her little pistol. There would be no Grant to rush to her aid this evening.

But at least Sparrow, the hotel doorman, stood at his post outside, apparently unbothered by the lurking men. As he held the door for her, she cast a quick glance up the street in the hope of seeing who followed her. There was no one threatening t, just two young bucks weaving down a side street toward the seamier part of town, and a child running up the high street in the opposite direction. And a man with a wooden leg vanishing around the corner. She wondered if it

were Jackie.

With relief, Kate entered the hotel with a world of thanks to Sparrow, still glad she'd refused all offers of escort. She didn't like to give in, either to her own fears or to people's infamy. She'd been the first to leave the vicarage, while the money in the bowl was being counted, but rather to her surprise, several gentlemen had offered to escort her. Kate doubted it was with their wives' blessing. She'd departed, determinedly alone, after a brief exchange with the curate.

"May I call on you tomorrow?" he'd asked as he walked with her across the hall to the front door.

"Of course. Or...perhaps you ride, Mr. Grant?"

"I do," he said with a hint of ruefulness. "But I'm afraid I keep no horses."

A curate's salary would hardly stretch to that, not if he had no other source of income. "Fortunately," she said, "two of mine arrived at the livery stables this morning. One is rather large for me, but he'd appreciate the exercise. I can meet you at the stables at seven tomorrow."

"Very well."

She offered him her hand. "Thank you for an entertaining evening," she drawled.

"If it was, you made it so." He took her hand, bowing over it punctiliously.

"That is a good line. Be sure to use it to all your guests. Good night, Mr. Grant."

Although she hadn't stayed to see, she was sure he'd been smiling as she walked away from him. The memory made her smile now. Perhaps because the evening had convinced her of one thing, the curate was no French spy.

*

JEREMIAH TUGG, WHOM both Kate and Grant would probably have recognized as the knife-wielding ruffian who'd attacked her—even with his hat pulled low over his forehead—slid onto the tavern bench beside his colleagues. He lifted his mug of ale.

"Well?" he growled.

They'd been lying low in the tavern, where no one ever asked any questions, and making occasional individual forays for information.

"We can't get to her," Snoddie said gloomily. "There's always people around. Some handy, burly looking coves keeping watch. Seems to me she's hired some protection. Then there's that posh bloke with the fists." He touched his still bruised eye in memory. "He quite often skulks in that coffee house across the road from the hotel."

Tugg grunted. "Then we need to get *into* the hotel."

"Can't," said young Barrow. "They wouldn't let us in the back door, never mind the front. The back door leads straight through the kitchen. We'd be seen and stopped. And the ground floor windows are all locked. I suppose we could rough up the boy at the desk and make him tell us where her room is, but we still need to get past the doorman."

"We could take him together," Snoddie offered.

"Wouldn't that be discreet," Tugg mocked savagely. "This was meant to be a quick job, made to look like a robbery-gone-wrong, after which we vanish and no one links it to the gov'nor. It should look random, not that we've taken a lot of trouble to go after her! What about this posh cove, the one with the fists?"

"You want to take him on again?" Barrow asked in dismay. His arm was still in a sling and all but useless. Besides, it probably hurt like hell.

Tugg knew he was going to have to be cunning. "Maybe we can get someone else to take him on. Damn town is full of watchmen and soldiers. We just need to give them a reason to go after him. Then when he's out of the way, we'll find a moment to do the job. Who the devil is he?"

Snoddie and Barrow looked at each other, then at Leman and Tugg. Snoddie shrugged. "Just some nob."

"He's the vicar," Leman rumbled. He was a man of few words.

"Vicar?" Tugg said in disgust. "You mean we got seen off by a bloody vicar?"

Leman nodded and took a draft of ale.

"No one," Tugg said forcefully. "No one mentions this back in London."

"How do you know he's a vicar?" Barrow asked.

Leman cast him a blank look. "Followed him."

"All very well," Tugg uttered, "but how do we get soldiers or the watch to arrest the bleeding vicar?"

Leman stirred again, no doubt easing his twisted ankle. "French prisoner."

"What?" Tugg and everyone else scowled at him in incomprehension. "The cove that jumped into the sea?"

"He went to the vicar's place. The vicar's hiding him."

Tugg's mouth fell open.

Barrow said, "How do you know that?"

"Because he followed the vicar," Tugg answered impatiently, and to Leman himself. "Why the bleeding hell didn't you tell us this before?"

Leman shrugged. "Wasn't interested in him. I was waiting for the

girl to turn up. Which she did tonight, along with a load of other nob. Couldn't get near her, though, for all the other coves following her about"

Tugg grinned. "Well thank the good Lord you came along, my friend. Now, how should we get word to the military gents along the road?"

*

KATE'S CONFIDENCE IN the curate's innocence lasted until the morning, when her pleasure in her upcoming assignation made her doubt everything. He could be meeting her to silence her one way or another.

In her heart, she couldn't really credit that, but neither did she trust her desire to believe in him. Men let her down all the time. It was only ever a matter of degree. A clergyman of murky origin who actually seemed to do his job was no different.

Still, it was with an air of suppressed excitement that she donned the blue riding habit and its matching, jaunty little hat. Then she let Little, still yawning and in her night gown, go back to bed. Kate hid the little pistol inside the pocket she'd hand sewn into the habit, and left the room.

A maid polishing the brasses on the front door, let her out of the hotel and she walked the short distance to the stables. The market was being set up in the square, the traders calling cheerfully to each other and exchanging friendly insults. It was, Kate thought, a charming little town, and in a beautiful location at the seaside, surrounded on the other sides by rugged hills, rolling farmlands, and scattered lakes.

Peter, her young groom, greeted her at the stables with a grin and a tug of his cap. "Snow's all ready for you, m'lady."

"Excellent. Can you saddle Gladiator, too? A friend is joining me."

While she waited, she petted Snow, who was delighted to see her again, snuffling at her neck and nudging her for sugar treats. Kate stroked his nose and watched the yard gate. Her breath caught when Grant walked in, dressed in buff breeches and a dark coat. Had she really thought he wouldn't come?

This was ridiculous. He was the only man she accorded any trust at all. He was the only man she'd *wished* to trust in years. And yet he was the only one she wasn't sure of. She couldn't snap her fingers and have him running in the hope of a place in her bed.

"Good morning!" she greeted him. "I'm surprised to see you up and abroad after last night's debauchery."

"I assure you I was asleep before midnight."

"And your patient?" she asked more quietly as he halted before

her, reaching out to stroke Snow's nose. She let her own caressing hand drop to her side.

"I think the fever's abated. He'll mend."

"Good. Ah, here is Gladiator," she murmured as the groom led the stallion out of the stable, duly saddled and ready for riding. "Gladiator, this is Mr. Grant. He is a clergyman, so you must be on your best behavior."

"Goodness, he's a magnificent creature," Grant said with a hint of awe.

Gladiator nudged Snow aside and snorted into Kate's hat. Laughing, she reached up to stroke him, standing on tiptoe to kiss his nose.

"He's a bit restless, sir," Peter warned. "Likes his own way. Just be firm."

"I'm sure we'll reach an understanding," Grant murmured, running his hand over the animal's powerful neck.

Peter adjusted the stirrups, then left Grant and Gladiator to get to know each other, while he boosted Kate into the saddle.

"Do you want me with you, my lady?" he murmured, casting a quick glance at Grant.

"Oh no, he's a clergyman and utterly respectable," she drawled, loudly enough for Grant to hear. Until she said it, she hadn't even been sure whether to take Peter or not. She just hoped she was right to trust her instincts.

If Grant heard her, he gave no sign, merely hauled himself nimbly into Gladiator's saddle. The horse snorted loudly, tossing his head and dancing. Grant shortened the reins in one hand, soothing him with the other and murmuring words she couldn't hear.

Gladiator snorted again, but condescended to trot forward to join Kate and Snow. It was a promising start, although Gladiator would want his head immediately for a hard gallop. She knew Grant would have trouble keeping him in line until they were free of the town.

"You manage him well," Kate allowed as they trotted together along the road.

"I should hope so. Do you really ride him yourself?"

"Occasionally. But mostly I keep him with me just because I love him." Annoyed with herself, she added, "And for the use of lovers, of course."

"Of course. I'm honored to be counted as such."

She eyed him challengingly. "You've never touched me, Mr. Grant."

"Oh, I don't know," he murmured. "I think I do, a little."

It wasn't the kind of touching she meant, but she laughed anyway.

As the town buildings thinned and vanished into open country,

Grant led the way off the main road along a track that opened into gently sloping land crossed with a stream. Smiling, Kate tapped Snow with her heels and gave him his head. She hoped that if Gladiator was going to throw Grant, he'd do it quickly, before he gathered speed.

In no time, Grant streaked past her. She was almost disappointed until she realized that Gladiator wasn't actually the one in control. As she galloped in their wake, she saw that Grant was, in fact, a superb rider, knowing instinctively how to make his mount both happy and responsive. They leapt the stream together, then slowed by mutual agreement, exhilarated and breathless.

"You are an excellent horseman!" she approved.

"I should be. I was a cavalryman for several years."

"At last," she exclaimed. "The mystery of Mr. Grant revealed."

His smile was slightly twisted. "There is no mystery. My father bought me a commission, since it was what I wanted, and bade me become a general before he died. I rose to be a captain with a field promotion to Brigade Major before I gave it up and studied for the Church instead."

"Why?" Studying him with curiosity, she recognized the bodily toughness of a seasoned soldier. More nebulously, she also acknowledged the sort of serene, almost unworldly grace of a group of monks she'd once met. It was a contradictory and yet heady mix. "Were you wounded?"

"Body and soul," he said flippantly. Then, with a quick glance at her. "Yes, I was wounded, but that's not the reason I resigned my commission. I resigned because I lived."

"I don't understand."

He drew in his breath. "There was an ambush. Well, many ambushes. I commanded the escort of several important people—and guns—to Lord Wellington. The French harassed us constantly. I won't sicken you with the whole story. Suffice it to say I completed my task but lost half my men. And my superiors wanted to give me awards, promote me." He gave a quick, almost savage smile. "It seems I could give the difficult orders. I just couldn't live with myself afterward. I'd had enough of death. I wanted to do something more positive than kill. And anyway, I made a promise to God."

"Do you regret it?"

He shook his head.

"You mean you actually *like* all these people depending on you?"

A smile flashed through his eyes. "Actually, yes. I liked that in the war, too, only there, my decisions didn't always count."

"When Mr. Hoag comes back they might not count here either."

"At least he won't shoot me. Or force me to put people in unnecessary danger."

"Mrs. Hoag, however, is altogether more formidable."

"I'll wear plate armor under my shirt."

Kate smiled, holding his gaze. "And Cornelius?"

"Ah. A different kind of tale. A love story. He followed an actress to France, in the teeth of our father's fury. Don't ask me how. There are always ways."

Kate blinked. "Did he want to marry her?"

"Lord, no, though he told my father he'd do so—to annoy him mainly. In fact, she ditched him within a month of his reaching France. Or he might have abandoned her. It's not always easy to tell from his ramblings. In any case, they parted, and he was trying to come home when his ship was caught up in some naval skirmish. The crew were forced to fight the British. He was captured by Alban, who presumably interfered in the battle for his own ends. Cornelius couldn't reveal his identity for fear of his fellow prisoners. Besides, he couldn't let the scandal touch my father if they discovered who he was."

"Who exactly is your father?" she asked. "I don't believe I know any Grants."

"Grant isn't his name." He shifted uncomfortably on his horse. "He's the Earl of Boulton."

The blood drained from her face. "Boulton? You're Lord Boulton's son?"

"On the wrong side of the blanket," he said disparagingly. "Why? Are you wondering if you now need to consider my offer of marriage seriously? Don't worry, I'm still a penniless curate of dubious origins."

"And yet you offered anyway," she blurted. "Did you know I would turn you down?"

"Yes, but I haven't given up hope."

"Why?" she demanded. "I'd make an impossible curate's wife."

His smile, warm and dazzling, thrilled her to her toes. "Because I can't imagine any greater happiness."

She was in danger of slipping under his spell again, of losing reality. Dragging herself back up, she said tartly, "I don't make people happy, and we're straying from the point which is that you are Lord Boulton's son."

"And my eldest half-brother, Viscount Vernon, was your lover."

For a moment, she couldn't speak. Unaccustomed shame seemed to curl through her body from her toes. And yet everyone knew. Why should he be any different? He couldn't know that the night she was discovered with Vernon was the only time she'd ever been in his house, that even then it had been trickery. She'd actually been on her way out, in high dudgeon, when Dickie, Crowmore's heir, and several men of business had arrived looking for her to break the news of her

widowhood.

Kate lifted her chin.

"So what?" she challenged. "Did you think to indulge in a little sibling rivalry over me? I can't imagine Vernon envying you marriage with his leftovers."

"Stop it," he commanded fiercely.

She laughed. "Why? I won't hold you to the marriage. By now I'm sure half the town believes I have my claws in you already. But you know, I don't believe Vernon's the jealous sort."

"Stop talking about yourself that way."

"What way?" she drawled. "I know exactly what I am and what I've done." And the real, crying shame, the physical pain clawing at her stomach came from the confused knowledge that the only man they could really associate her with was Grant's brother. She could never now have Tristram Grant.

She didn't know if she'd misjudged him or he'd misjudged her, but his relationship to Vernon had just ruined everything. Whatever everything was. Possibility, friendship, sweetness...

"I know what Vernon's done," he said unexpectedly, his voice not quite steady. "And trust me, I could knock his teeth down his throat for it."

She forced another laugh, while part of her wondered, wildly, what the devil was going on with him. "You can't possibly know what he has done or hasn't done," she scoffed. "Master Curate, I am not a wronged woman. The world knows me for an adulteress, a walking scandal, the shame of two families—"

She got no further, for without warning, he leaned across the space between them and fastened his lips to hers.

Shock held her frozen. But his mouth wasn't cold. Hot and firm, it clung to hers, moving on her parted lips in fierce yet tender exploration. The two horses walked together contentedly, all but bumping against each other as they made their way toward the woods.

He may be a curate, she thought from nowhere, *but he's no stranger to women...*

Of course he wasn't. He'd been a soldier, a handsome one, and no doubt a very dashing one. Women must have fallen at his feet. And his kiss melted her bones. Skillful and yet overtly passionate, it aroused and tempted her tingling body. And when his tongue slid along her lower lip and inside her mouth, she gave in and kissed him back.

With a groan, he sank his mouth deeper. One hand on her cheek, the other hot on her shoulder, he kissed her as if he'd never stop, while the horses walked on.

His face was warm and rough under her trembling fingertips. No

one had ever kissed her like this, made her feel like this.

"You kiss most sinfully," she whispered against his lips. "For a clergyman."

"So do you," he said huskily, "for a clergyman's wife."

Laughter caught in her throat as he straightened in the saddle and halted Gladiator before dismounting. Snow stopped, too, without any instruction from her. They were on the edge of the forest.

Kate's heart beat like a drum as Grant tied Gladiator's reins loosely around a tree branch and then walked over to her, holding up his arms in clear invitation.

"Why do you want to marry me?" She meant it to be light, mocking, but it came out as a broken whisper.

"Because I love you."

"You don't know me." Anguished tears trembled in her eyes and she had to glare at him to prevent them falling.

"But I do." His hands closed on her waist and she couldn't object as he lifted her down from the saddle. She stood so close to his strong, hard body that its heat enflamed her. He cupped her face between his hands. "The very first time I saw you, in the Assembly Rooms, so bravely challenging their petty disapproval, I knew. You were the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. You always will be."

"Beauty is skin deep," she managed. "I'm not a good woman, Tristram, you know I'm not."

"Yes, you are. I know that in my bones." He bent his head, his lips hovering over hers.

"No, you're justifying lust. There's no need." Her heart thundered, but this at last was *right*. And she had nothing to lose. She would only be catching up with her reputation. With him, it would be so different, so sweet, so ... necessary. "You can just take me," she whispered. "You always could."

"I want you to love me first."

She was fascinated by the texture of his lips, so firm and sculpted and tempting. She swallowed. "I'm incapable of love. Everyone knows that."

"I don't," he said, and kissed her again with slow, deliberate sensuality.

Of their own volition, her arms crept up around his neck, and when he fitted his body close against hers, her mouth opened wide. She stumbled backward as shocking desire flooded her, and Snow, snorting, stepped delicately out of the way.

Grant left her mouth with apparent reluctance. Taking the reins from her careless hand, he walked Snow to the same tree as Gladiator and tied the reins.

He faced Kate, his clouded eyes devouring her. "Come here," he

said huskily.

She stayed where she was. "I don't love you."

"Your kisses say otherwise. Come here."

"My lips are befuddled. So is my brain. They've never encountered anyone quite like you before."

He began to walk toward her, presumably because she stood rooted to the same spot he'd left her. In panic, she didn't know whether to fall into his arms or ward him off. He looked so predatory, so desirable. And she'd already offered herself to him.

He took her in his arms and without warning, lifted her right off the ground, sinking with her onto the soft spongy earth.

"If I loved you now," he whispered, dragging his open mouth across her throat and kissing the pulse which beat there so rapidly. "If I took off all your clothes and loved you now, would you love me back?"

"My body knows what to do," she said, deliberately brazen.

He lifted his head, stroking her hair and sweeping off her half loose hat as he went. "And yet men always disappoint you."

"Not in matters of physical pleasure," she drawled, quite untruthfully. But she needed the cloak of wicked Kate for this encounter, for she'd no idea what to do.

He tilted his head to one side. "And yet I surprise you. I make you surprise yourself."

She widened her eyes deliberately. "You're a clergyman."

It was an act she'd perfected over the years, one that kept things light and amusing and self-mocking. No one had ever seen through it, even in the early days. But Grant's eyes seemed to pierce hers, seeing everything. *Please not everything.*

"Who hurt you?" he whispered. "Who hurt you first? Your husband?"

"No. It was me." She tried to sit up, but he moved his body half over hers, catching her hands and holding them above her head.

"You? How."

She tried to laugh, to make little of it, and it wasn't a bad effort. "Crowmore was my punishment. Because I loved another man, a younger son, a penniless soldier who wanted to marry me. And I wouldn't hold out for him. I gave in and married my family's choice."

"He was older than you."

"Crowmore? Only by about forty years or so."

"Was he not kind to his young bride?"

She tugged furiously at her hands. "I won't talk about this. Let me go."

"Then he wasn't kind."

"Kind? Crowmore? I had to hide the maidservants from him for

common humanity. Let me go, Mr. Grant, or I'll ram my knee where you least want it."

Strategically, he shifted position and held her legs down with one of his own. His eyes, full of outrage and a pity she couldn't bear, told her he'd guessed the rest. The humiliation and physical abuse that had come so close to breaking her. "Could your family do nothing for you?" he asked gently.

"They could call me a liar and send me back to him." She had to close her eyes for a moment, to fight the resurgent sense of betrayal, the final knowledge that whatever Crowmore did to her, she was alone. "I developed my own strategies of escape. I lived my own life apart from him and became a discreet scandal so that he would stay away. Even before Crowmore died, the world knew me for an adulteress. Don't you?"

"I know you never loved anyone. Except the young soldier you didn't marry."

"Trust me that is the one blessing in this whole business. That and the fact that Crowmore is dead. And people expect me to mourn him?" She laughed, a brittle, inhuman sound that should have sent him scurrying away from her.

Instead, he smoothed her hair and kissed her forehead, reminding her she lay pinned beneath his heavy thigh. And in spite of all he'd made her think about, even talk about, she was undeniably aroused.

"I think there's more," he said softly. "Or at least less. You flirt, you tease and provoke better than anyone I've ever encountered. But you don't kiss like a woman with vast experience of love."

Her heart beat hard beneath his. Confounded, she had no idea what to say.

"Is that a criticism?" she managed at last.

"God no. I love your kisses. I'd die for your kisses." As if to prove it, he took another. Her mouth trembled beneath his, responding from pure instinct. She tried to speak, and he drew back, just a little.

I've only ever kissed two men in my life. One was David Keith whom I gave up for Crowmore when I was little more than a child. The other is you. She couldn't say the words. They would break what was left of her protective shell.

A frown flickered across his face as his eyes searched hers. "Rumor lied, didn't it?" he said softly. "There were no lovers."

She closed her eyes against the intolerable intrusion, before she remembered she never hid. She opened them again. "I am a most accomplished flirt," she drawled. "And it seems men like to lie about their conquests. It turned out I liked to be wicked. Apart from anything else, it provided a wonderful excuse to live apart from my husband."

He swallowed, and this time the words had to be wrung out of him. "And Vernon?"

She dragged her gaze free at last. "You have no right to ask me that. It reflects well on neither of us, but he never touched me."

"Poor Kate," he whispered unexpectedly, and kissed her cheeks and her lips. "My poor Kate."

She wrenched her mouth free. "Don't pity me, damn you. You're the only one who deserves that if you believe in *poor Kate*."

"I believe in the sweet, trusting girl beneath your hard shell, and in the strong, brave woman you've become. You have compassion and kindness and love. I've seen them."

"No, you haven't," Kate disputed, more rattled by this than anything else.

Grant smiled. "Yes, I have," he said and kissed her stunned mouth so tenderly that she forgot what he'd made her confess.

This strange intimacy with him was at once frightening, soothing, and thrilling. His caresses awakened some powerful need, even as her heart quailed, and a warm bubble of safety seemed to form around them.

"I'm far beneath you in birth and wealth," he said, raising his head from a particularly blistering kiss that left her breathless. "But you'll let me court you?"

"Apparently," she managed. "Although I'm not sure it's an entirely proper courtship."

"Well, I'm looking forward to a thoroughly improper marriage." He paused. As of recognizing the ambiguity of his words. "But a faithful one."

"I'm not a faithful woman."

"I'll make you so."

"You're very sure of yourself."

"I'm sure of you. If you love me."

"If," she reminded him. "If. And even *if*, I won't marry you. I won't marry anyone." And because she couldn't help it, she kissed him, long and hard, before finally pushing him off and jumping to her feet. "Now, Master Curate, I insist on going home before we are discovered!"

It seemed indescribably funny to be standing together by the horses, picking grass and earth off each other and trying to re-pin her hair under her fashionable little hat while laughter kept bubbling up inside her. But somehow, they managed it before one last, lingering kiss. Then he lifted her into the saddle and they began the ride back to Blackhaven.

For some reason, her heart was singing.

Chapter Seven

GRANT, STRIDING BACK to the vicarage from the stables, had difficulty dealing with the combined euphoria and frustration of his body. The joy of holding Kate in his arms and tasting her delicious kisses had sorely tried his clamoring lusts, which wanted far more from her than he'd ever take at this stage. He refused to be one of the men who took advantage of her and used her. In any way.

He knew the way the world worked. After all, he'd lived in his father's house for long enough. An inexperienced, lonely young wife, abused and desperate for any kind of affection, preyed upon by the town rakes who valued notches in their bedposts more than love or honor. Even notches they weren't entitled to.

Not that he imagined she didn't beguile them in her own witty, world-weary way, but she'd have allowed none too close. He suspected his own half-brother had tricked her in some way, and then abandoned her, keeping his head down and certainly not defending her during the first surge of the scandal.

Well, she knew the worst of Grant now, too, and still she'd kissed him, in a way that almost broke his heart, for despite her sensuality and latent passion, there was a delightful wonder in those kisses. She intoxicated him.

"Grant?" said an astonished voice in front of him.

Dragged out of his all-consuming reverie, Grant halted, turning toward the voice and blinking the man who accosted him into focus. He looked vaguely familiar, about his own age, tall and dark with distinctive upward-sloping eyebrows and dressed in the first height of elegance. Hastily, he searched his mind for a name or context.

"It is you, isn't it?" the man said. "Tris Grant of the Queen's Own?"

Abruptly, the years fell away.

"Keith!" he exclaimed, throwing out his hand. "Good Lord, how are you?"

Lieutenant Keith—or had he been a captain the last time they'd met on the battlefields of Spain?—grasped his hand and shook it warmly. "Couldn't be better, as it happens. What are you doing in this civilian backwater? Surely you haven't left the army?"

"Some three years ago."

Keith looked him up and down. "You're not here for your health, are you?" he asked. "Wounded?"

“Recovered. No, I’m the curate.”

Keith blinked. His lips twitched. “Curate,” he repeated. “You’re joking me.”

“Serious as a clergyman, give you my word. You seem to be out of uniform, also.”

“Five years ago. I inherited my brother’s estate.”

“You look well on it,” Grant allowed. “Although I’m sorry for the loss of your brother. What brings you to Blackhaven?”

“My wife,” Keith said with just a faint intonation of pride, as if he couldn’t help it. “Her family is here. In fact, you must come to dinner tonight, if you’re free.”

“I’d love to, if your wife would not object.”

“Oh no, she’s very sociable. Come around seven. The Haven in Cliff Crescent.”

“The Haven?” Grant said at once. “Then you’re Bernard Muir’s brother-in-law? But that makes you—”

“Wickenden,” said the erstwhile Lieutenant Keith apologetically.

The Wicked Baron himself. Grant couldn’t help it. He laughed. “Well, here is another strange friendship for the local gossips!”

*

“THERE’S A LETTER for you, my lady,” Little greeted Kate when she returned to the hotel.

Kate’s heart gave an unpleasant little dive. “From London?”

“Oh no, hand delivered,” Little replied, swiping it from the mantelpiece and handing it over.

Kate didn’t recognize the writing. She shrugged off the cape of her habit and tossed the hat after it on the sofa, before breaking the seal on the letter.

“Good lord,” she said faintly. “It’s an invitation from Mrs. Winslow to Henrit House, to her ball next Saturday.”

Little grinned, clearly pleased by this provincial social success. “There. She must like you now, having met you at the vicarage.”

“There’s nothing as respectable as a vicar,” Kate murmured, and immediately thought of the curate’s sinful kisses.

“You will go?” Little asked anxiously.

“I might,” Kate said, carelessly dropping the note. “Help me out of this habit, will you? I think I might step round the pump room and take the waters. After all, I’m meant to be here for my health.”

The frequenters of the pump room that day were, for the most part, visitors to Blackhaven. Most were unknown to Kate, or known only by name, but they must have grown used to the idea of her presence, because she encountered only civility. And when she left

again, having forced down two whole cups of the clear, if quite ordinary tasting water, she passed Mrs. Fenton and her daughter in the street. Both bowed to her with a polite greeting.

My, Kate thought, impressed in spite of herself. She tried to make fun of it, but in truth she felt ridiculously pleased by this apparent softening of the town toward her. She began to think she might even enjoy her time here.

Her optimism lasted all the way to the hotel, where she was told a visitor awaited her in the coffee room. Immediately, she was sure it was Mr. Grant and turned toward the room with a smile she couldn't hide.

Lord Vernon strolled through the door toward her. "Kate, you look delicious enough to eat. How are you?"

Kate blinked. "Good God. What are *you* doing in Blackhaven?"

Grant's half-brother smiled lazily, coming to a halt before her. "I've come to see you, of course."

Once, she'd enjoyed flirting with him so much that she'd come close to finally forming a liaison with him. She'd liked him so much that a note from him had sent her rushing gullibly from a ball to his aid. At three o'clock in the morning. The ruse, however, she'd found so annoying and petty that she'd stalked out without even removing her shawl. It had been pure bad luck to run into Dickie and his creatures in the hallway. Looking for her to tell her Crowmore was dead.

She hadn't laid eyes on Vernon from the moment until this. He'd vanished from her life, leaving her to face the combined onslaught of her own family and the Crowmores alone. And the resulting scandal that had surrounded the burial. She hadn't really cared at the time. Vernon's lack of support was exactly what she expected of men. But even then, she'd known it was over before it had begun, that she was finished with him. And now, he was an irritant.

"Well, you've seen me," she observed, stepping around him. "Felicitations. Goodbye, Vernon."

His astonished expression was ludicrous, and yet as she sailed across the foyer and upstairs, she had no desire to laugh. His presence here appalled her and it took a moment for her to realize why. She didn't want her old life, her old scandals following her to Blackhaven, not when she'd found she could begin to shake them off. Not now that she'd met Tristram Grant who meant ... she wasn't quite sure what, but something important, something larger than she'd ever encountered before.

Little's eyes were large and anxious when she met Kate in her rooms. "Lord Vernon's here," the maid said, obviously trying very hard not to sound disapproving. "At the hotel, I mean."

"I know. I met him downstairs. Damn the man, what's he doing here? See if you can find out, Little. Make conversation with his valet, or the hotel staff. See what they know."

"Well, I will, but surely *you're* the only reason he'd have come here."

"Just to add fuel to the scandal when it's beginning to die down?" Kate paced furiously to the window.

"Maybe..." Little paused and swallowed and began again more determinedly. "Maybe he loves you."

Kate laughed. "And pigs might fly."

More likely, he was broke and wanted to borrow a hundred to see him through. And he'd inflict himself on her in the public dining room. If she took a private one and he tried to do the same, she'd be obliged to have the hotel staff throw him out, and that would be more scandal. She could always pack up and move on, maybe to Edinburgh, except that it went against the grain to let anyone drive her away from where she wished to be. Which was Blackhaven.

Besides, Grant wouldn't follow her to Edinburgh. Though Vernon might, if he was desperate enough.

Kate stripped off her gloves and threw them on the nearest chair without looking. Would Grant know his brother was here? Would he think she had summoned him? Would Vernon's presence kill whatever feeling Grant had for her? Feelings which, after all, could hardly be very deep considering the few days they'd been acquainted.

Vaguely, Kate was aware of Little picking up the gloves. If only clearing up the rest of her life was as easy!

"Little—"

A knock at the door interrupted her. She swung around, meeting the maid's gaze. Little lifted her eyebrows, silently asking if she should answer it.

"I'm not at home," Kate said. "On no account, let him in here."

Little squared her shoulders. She could be quite formidable when she chose to be. It was one of the reasons Kate employed her.

Her back to the window, she watched Little walk across the room and open the door little more than a crack. Then she opened it wider, exchanged a quick word or two with whoever was on the other side, and stepped back, closing it once more.

"It's another letter," she said, waving the epistle. "Yet another invitation, I daresay. You are in demand today!"

To her relief, the writing was not Lord Vernon's. It was strong and flowing and unknown to her. She opened it and, scanning it, gave a quick, relieved breath of laughter.

"We are saved," she said flippantly, "for one night at least. Mrs. Muir has invited me for dinner."

"Who's Mrs. Muir? Another of the vicarage ladies?" Little asked hopefully.

"Not to my knowledge. I imagine she's Roman Catholic, being Spanish. Her step-children are friends of mine. Sort of."

Gillie and Wickenden must have arrived. She wondered how Gillie felt about having her in the house. Gillie had guessed their past relationship before marrying Wickenden, but that didn't mean the younger woman would trust her now. She should probably make that right, too.

"So you'll go?" Little persisted.

Kate walked across to the desk and sat, drawing a sheet of paper in front of her, and then reaching for the pen. "I shall go. And you shall carry my acceptance."

*

CORNELIUS WAS BORED. Although he'd managed to dress himself, with Tris's help, he was too weak to go out or even walk around much. And then, he was under orders not to let Mrs. Walsh hear him walking around the room. She stayed late on a Monday, apparently, to finish the laundry. So, Cornelius had several books piled up on his bed to try to distract himself. But he hadn't read more than a paragraph of any of them. He wished he had someone to talk to instead, but Tris had gone out and left him, saying that the doctor might call round while he was away, and he'd given him a key to get in, in case Mrs. Walsh had already gone.

Cornelius, his bored ears taking in every tiny sound in the house, knew she hadn't gone when the peremptory knocking pounded at the front door.

"Oh, I'm coming, I'm coming," he heard the woman grumble her way up from the kitchen toward the front door. "Where's the fire, for goodness's sake?"

The front door seemed to slam open with a suddenness that made Cornelius jump.

"Here!" Mrs. Walsh cried in mingled alarm and outrage. "You can't burst in here like this! This is the vicarage!"

"We know where and what it is, ma'am," said a gentleman's voice curtly. "Please stand aside or my men will remove you."

Cornelius jumped to his feet, boredom and weakness forgotten. *My men?* Surely this must be the soldiers who'd taken delivery of him and the other prisoners from Captain Alban. He was at his bedchamber door before he knew it, opening the door a crack. Heavy boots trampled in the hall downstairs.

"Where is Mr. Grant?" the officer demanded.

“He’s out!” Mrs. Walsh exclaimed. “And he won’t be pleased when he gets back neither!”

“And your guest?” the officer asked.

Damnation. They know about me. Cornelius cast a quick glance over his shoulder, but there was nothing in the room that wasn’t Tris’s. He’d burned Cornelius’s torn and bloody clothes.

“What other guest?” Mrs. Walsh demanded. “There’s no one here but Mr. Grant. The vicar and his family are away.”

Cornelius slipped out of the bedchamber and crept along the passage toward the attic stairs. Not a moment too soon, for he could hear boots clumping upstairs.

“You’d better damage nothing, Lieutenant,” Mrs. Walsh warned. “And *you* can explain to Mr. Grant the muddy boot prints on my clean floor!”

Cornelius grinned as he slipped behind the door to the attic stairs and began to climb. If Mr. Grant even *noticed* mud on clean floors he was a much-changed man.

The attic consisted of a storeroom and a couple of tiny bedchambers. Tris thought about hiding in a trunk, but the soldiers might be too thorough for that. Glancing upward, he realized that although the walls sloped, the ceiling was flat. There was roof space above the main attic. A quick search found a half-open trap door at the back of the storeroom, and even a rickety ladder.

While the soldiers clumped about below, Cornelius shinned up the ladder, pushed aside the trap, and scrambled into the cramped space. He was still drawing up the ladder when someone opened the attic door. Fortunately, they couldn’t see him from there, so he had time to bring the ladder right up and softly replace the trap door, while the soldiers opened trunks and looked under the servants’ beds.

“You ask me, it’s a complete hum,” one of the soldiers muttered. “Why the devil would Mr. Grant of all people hide an escaped prisoner?”

“It’s true he bumped into him before the Frenchman escaped,” the other replied.

“I don’t see what that has to say to anything,” the first man argued, letting a trunk lid fall with a crash. “There’s no one here.”

“Of course there’s no one here,” Mrs. Walsh’s voice said with deep contempt. “I told you Mr. Grant was out.”

“Why is he sleeping in two different bedchambers?” the officer asked from beyond the attic.

“Because he can,” Mrs. Walsh retorted. “His own chamber’s right above the kitchen, so I expect he prefers the more peaceful front room when the Hoags are away. Ask him!”

“I will,” the officer assured her. “Where did you say Mr. Grant

was?"

"I didn't. But he went to the Muirs in Cliff Crescent. I wish you'd call there next because Mrs. Muir's a fierce Spanish lady and she eats insolent cubs like you for breakfast!"

Cornelius grinned, warming to the housekeeper he'd never met. But as she shooed them all out of the house and he contemplated leaving his attic, he began to wonder if he could actually do it. Now that the excitement was lessening, he felt weak as a kitten. His wound throbbed and his head ached.

*

BY THE TIME Kate walked round to Cliff Crescent, she had worked out that Mrs. Muir, whom she'd never met, had been most likely inspired to invite her by Bernard. She had no idea how any anyone else in the house would regard her attendance at a cozy family reunion dinner. So, she did what she always did, hid her nerves in the familiar, languidly fashionable pose.

The last time she'd been in Blackhaven, she'd been most curious to see behind the front door of the house rumored to be a gambling den. For the sake of Lady Braithwaite, her hostess, she had refrained from visiting and had never come closer than viewing from a carriage in the crescent. Which at least made the house simple to find.

Inevitably it was small, by Kate's standards, but the door was opened by a polite young footman who took her pelisse and showed her into a salon on the ground floor. She could already hear the voices and laughter before he opened the door and announced, "Lady Crowmore."

She had grown used to the sudden silences that followed her entrance to any establishment these days, so she kept the faint, cynical smile on her lips as she strolled into the room. At least the three men within stood up at once, and she was welcomed immediately by the lady of the house. A very dark woman, a few years older than Kate, came to her with hand extended.

"Lady Crowmore, how kind of you to come," she said in heavily accented English. "I am Isabella Muir, Gillie and Bernard's stepmother."

"How kind of you to invite me," Kate said, and then Gillie was there, offering her hand with a happy smile of welcome that made Kate blink.

Of course, Gillie was much better dressed than on their last encounter—trust David to see to that—and her hair was cut more fashionably. But she still appeared to be the same open, lively creature Kate had warmed to in spite of herself two months ago. Except,

perhaps, that she seemed a little more self-assured. Her eyes shone with something Kate took a moment to recognize as sheer happiness. It made Kate's heart twist with a very strange mixture of pleasure and envy.

"I was so surprised when Bernard told us you were back in Blackhaven!" Gillie said, shaking hands.

"Likewise," Kate said languidly. "I was sure Wickenden would be dragging you through London's social whirl by now."

"Oh dear, no," Gillie said. "It will take me months just to get used to Wickenden Hall!"

Bernard eased his sister out of the way to greet Kate with a grin. "So glad you could come. Now, tell me, have you ever seen Wickenden in this position before?"

The brother and sister stood aside, giving her a direct view of the wicked baron dandling a baby in his arms. He didn't, however, look remotely sheepish, merely passed the baby to another man Kate didn't quite see for everyone else moving in the room, and came to kiss her cheek.

"Why, yes, I have," Kate said. "You must know he is a great favorite with his little nieces, who treat him with a lot less decorum. You're looking well, Wickenden." She turned to Mrs. Muir. "This is your son, ma'am? You must be very proud."

As she spoke, Mrs. Muir's face broke into a huge smile, and the man holding the baby stepped forward to return him to his mother. Which is when Kate realized the man was Tristram Grant. Her heart gave a thud of recognition. She had no idea how to keep the flush from her cheeks, could only hope no one would guess the reason.

"Mr. Grant," she murmured.

"Lady Crowmore."

"You know each other already," Gillie observed, while the sleeping baby was passed to his mother and duly admired by Kate from a safe distance—she had no clue how to deal with infants. "How comfortable! David bumped into Mr. Grant in the street this morning. It seems they are old friends."

"From my army days," Wickenden explained. "We were wild young officers together in India and the Peninsula."

"Of course you were," Kate murmured. Was there anyone she knew not intimately connected with Grant in some way?

Bernard presented her with a glass of sherry.

"I met an acquaintance of yours the other day," she remarked. "A Miss Smallwood?"

Bernard flushed.

"Jenny Smallwood?" Gillie exclaimed. "How is she?"

"Glowing with youthful health and beauty," Kate said flippantly.

She sipped her sherry and sat in the nearest chair. "We are going to take tea together."

Bernard looked appalled.

"Perhaps you should come, too, Lady Wickenden," Kate pursued.

"I'd love to," Gillie said at once. "Only I wish you'd call me, Gillie."

"Then I am Kate. We can spend a comfortable afternoon together traducing our menfolk."

"Here," Bernard said in alarm which made Gillie laugh.

Shortly afterward, they were then joined by an elderly lady Kate vaguely remembered, apparently Gillie and Bernard's Aunt Margaret. Everyone spoke up when they addressed her, so presumably she was somewhat deaf.

The conversation was unexpectedly easy and lively until dinner was announced and a maidservant came and took the still sleeping baby away.

Kate found herself seated next to Wickenden, who, as he took his place, murmured, "I'm sorry about all your troubles, Kate. I didn't hear anything about it until I got Julia's letter just before we left Wickenden. Is there anything I can do?"

"Why, no, I'm brazening it out as usual. In fact, if I wasn't on my best behavior, I'd propose a toast to your marriage and my freedom."

"Well, I'll drink to both of these, but I know you've been treated unfairly."

"I've course I haven't," she said lightly. "I just got caught."

"And Vernon? Is anyone shunning him?"

"Of course not. He's a man. No one ever shunned you, either."

Wickenden frowned. "Are you likening me to Lord Vernon?"

"Lord no, you were only ever a rake, not a rat." Belatedly remembering Vernon's relationship to Grant, she cast a quick glance across the table to where he sat between Mrs. Muir and Gillie. He appeared to be engrossed in his own conversation.

The dinner was informal, but surprisingly tasty, and the wine was excellent, a fact Wickenden complemented Bernard upon.

"Bernard has two virtues," Wickenden teased. "His palate and his skill at cards."

Bernard snorted.

Mr. Grant said innocently, "Are they not vices?"

"You're the expert," Kate murmured and won a laugh from everyone.

"I see you have the measure of our new vicar," Wickenden said, amused.

"Curate," Grant corrected, meeting Kate's gaze humorously.

Gillie's eyebrows rose but before she could ask the questions she

clearly intended, a fierce knocking at the front door almost shook the dining room, causing everyone to glance around for possible enlightenment.

“What on earth—” Mrs. Muir began, when both male and female voices could be heard in furious argument.

The dining room door was flung open and the footman all but fell in, saying urgently, “Madam, the soldiers are here!”

“Whatever for?” Gillie demanded.

“Mr. Grant,” the footman replied.

Grant laid down his napkin as the footman was thrust ruthlessly aside by a young officer who’d been at the harbor the other day to receive the French prisoners.

“Forgive the intrusion,” he blustered as Mrs. Muir jumped to her feet in alarm. She had her knife still grasped in one hand, which may have been why he didn’t immediately see his quarry. “We seek Mr. Grant.”

Kate’s heart seemed to leap into her throat. She was afraid she knew exactly why the soldiers sought Grant.

“Grant?” Bernard exclaimed at the other end of the table. “What the devil for?”

However, Grant looked remarkably calm as he rose to his feet. “You’ve found him, clearly. How can I help you, Lieutenant?”

“Your presence is requested, sir,” the lieutenant said stiffly, “to answer questions about the escape of the French prisoner on Saturday.”

Kate’s blood ran cold. Of course, someone else must have seen...

Grant blinked at the lieutenant. “You barged into Mrs. Muir’s home to ask me this now? If your questions are so urgent, why on earth didn’t you ask me them on Saturday? Or at any point before this evening? And if they’re not urgent, then, frankly, tomorrow would be more acceptable.”

“I saw the prisoner escape, too,” Kate drawled.

“Oh, so did I,” Aunt Margaret agreed. “Shocking thing. Have you found him at last? I hope he hasn’t been saying anything untoward about Mr. Grant—you do know he is a clergyman? The curate of St. Andrews?”

“Yes, ma’am, we know exactly who he is. And yes, sir, it has to be tonight,” the lieutenant said firmly, despite the flustered flush mounting to his cheeks.

“You do know also,” Wickenden said, flicking a no doubt imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve, “that when Mr. Grant was your age, he was the veteran of several battles and had been honored by Lord Wellington himself? In our day, we didn’t harass our own people, did we, Grant?”

“Not that I recall,” Grant said with a shrug. “However, I think it would be best if I left you to your dinner and accompanied the lieutenant to clear this up. Mrs. Muir, ladies, I can only apologize for the disruption.”

With a bow to Mrs. Muir and each of the other ladies present, he strolled across to the room to the lieutenant, murmuring audibly, “An apology would be in order from you, too.”

Flushing redder, the lieutenant muttered, “Forgive the interruption,” followed by something about duty and orders, none of which Kate heard properly because Grant had glanced back over his shoulder, deliberately locking his gaze to hers.

She read desperate anxiety there, and a plea, and she understood it at once. Although there was no need for him to ask. She closed her eyes for the briefest instant to set his mind at rest, and then he walked out of the room in front of the lieutenant.

“Well!” Aunt Margaret exclaimed.

“Of all the insolence,” Mrs. Muir said in outrage. “Who is that man? Lord Wickenden, you will do me the favor of having him dismissed!”

“I would if I could, ma’am. Kate, do you know what this is about?”

Kate shook her head in instinctive denial. This was not her secret to reveal. Gillie had jumped up and sped to the window, so Kate took the opportunity to follow her.

Since the dining room looked onto the street, she saw the soldiers emerge from the garden path, with the taller figure of Grant in their midst. Beside him, the lieutenant still looked mortified by his task, if determined to do his duty. A plain black carriage and four horses, with a soldier at the lead horse’s head, stood just beyond the gate.

Grant seemed cool and detached, if anything, impatient to get the matter over with, but the soldiers stood around him, listening to the lieutenant’s long-winded orders. He seemed to be directing two of the soldiers to the back step of the carriage and one onto the box with the driver. Grant appeared to be ignoring them. His attention was fixed on something or someone out of Kate’s line of vision.

Without warning, while the lieutenant was still issuing unnecessary commands to his little troop, Grant bolted past them and the carriage in the direction of the horses’ heads. A shout went up. One of the soldiers, then the others, started after him. Grant eluded a flying tackle by leaping upward and landing on the nearest horse’s back.

“Ya!” he cried, through the horse’s protest, kicking his heels, and slapping the animal’s rump. The stunned soldier at its head was sent sprawling in the gutter as the horse threw up its head and tried to rear. One of the soldiers actually grabbed at the harness, but it was

ripped from his grasp as horses, carriage, and Grant flew around the crescent in a flurry of whinnying, rumbling wheels, and galloping hooves.

Chapter Eight

FOR GRANT, THE matter had been annoying but hardly urgent. From the lieutenant's answers, he gathered Cornelius had not yet been found, so Grant's best plan was clearly to talk to the authorities and set their minds at rest. While Kate would, hopefully, send word to warn Cornelius to lie low. In fact, just as soon as he was strong enough, Cornelius should go home to their father. Loathe as Grant was to admit it, in this matter, Lord Boulton was Cornelius's best protection.

Providing the vindictive old bastard didn't disown him.

Those were his thoughts as he left the house, right up until he waited, kicking his heels, for the lieutenant to arrange the disposal of his men, which they could have quite easily worked out for themselves. But the debate gave him time to look around. Without those moments, he'd never have seen the figure lurking beyond the horse's heads, leaning against a garden gate and watching proceedings with interest. It was a disreputable figure to be hanging around a quiet, residential crescent, a grubby individual with dank hair hanging down from a hat pulled too far down over his face.

But even as Grant watched him, the man lifted his head, poked his hat further up with one finger, and grinned with blatant triumph. One of the men who'd attacked Kate. His heart surged in sudden fear and understanding. Somehow the man had discovered Cornelius and sent the soldiers after Grant. Not simply for revenge, surely, but to get him out of the way.

Kate. Oh, dear God, Kate!

He couldn't shout a warning to her, couldn't bolt back into the house and explain before the soldiers hauled him off again. As quick as thought, he darted past the pointlessly arguing soldiers and leapt on the horse's back, yelling and slapping to make them bolt, and they did.

Clinging on with his knees, he grasped the horse's mane as they thundered around the crescent, guiding them as best he could. Two ladies out for an evening stroll pressed themselves back into a garden hedge gawping at him as he hurtled by. God knew what they made of the soldiers in pursuit. Sadly, the curate's reputation was about to move beyond the merely eccentric.

Some of the soldiers had run back along the crescent to cut him off

as he emerged from the other end of it, but he charged through the middle of them, swerving around the corner toward coast road. Behind him, the carriage swayed and bumped, as if it was on two wheels and about to fall over, but he couldn't have slowed the horses if he tried.

The town rushed past him at full tilt, people and dogs scattering out of his way. One elderly gentleman waved his stick at him. Stray dogs and lap dogs on leads united in barking at him. It was a fine cacophony of chaos, and in spite of everything, Grant began to laugh.

*

KATE RUSHED OUT of the house with Gillie, Bernard, and Wickenden in time to see the carriage charge between the pursuing soldiers and career around the corner on two wheels.

Wickenden began to laugh. "Damned if I know what he's up to, but I'd have been sorry if he'd changed!"

"You mean this is normal behavior for our curate?" Bernard asked, apparently impressed. "Think I might cultivate the fellow. Certainly, he's nothing like old Hoag."

"What changed his mind?" Kate murmured, frowning. Ahead, two small boys were standing at the corner and pointing after the bolting carriage. "I could have sworn he meant to go with them quietly."

Wickenden glanced at her. "Come, let's go back. There's nothing more to see. Kate, is Grant in serious trouble of some kind?"

Kate shook her head. "No, I don't think so. Not really. But someone else could be. He's looking out for him. I think." She frowned. Surely that had been taken care of with his silent request? He knew she would warn Cornelius, and she meant to. Though she could hardly go charging around to the vicarage right now, with the soldiers hanging around this house and no doubt watching the vicarage, too.

Since they reentered the house at that point, Wickenden asked no more.

Kate refused to stay late, insisting the family must want time free of guests. Bernard at once leapt up to escort her, and for once, Kate didn't have her set-down ready to prevent him. Her mind was already torn between keeping up civil conversation and anxiety about Grant.

Unexpectedly, Gillie said, "No, David and I will walk with you. We were going for a walk in any case." As if she understood how and why Kate might not want her brother's escort.

So, while Wickenden was dispatched for Gillie's pelisse and bonnet, Kate made her thanks and farewells to Mrs. and Miss Muir, then walked out into the hall with Gillie, anxious to be gone.

Gillie lowered her voice. "Does Bernard bother you?"

"It's a passing phase," Kate said dismissively. "He thinks I'm exotic and wise, God help him. But if he's serious about the young Smallwood girl, he shouldn't neglect her. Her mother wants to sell her young to the highest bidder."

"I know. She even tried to snare David for her ...but that's a long story," Gillie said hastily. "Jenny was swithering between Bernard and Kit Grantham the last time I saw her, but I suppose now that Kit's gone back to the Peninsula, she only has Bernard to save her! If you ask me, they're both far too young for marriage."

"The trouble is, no one *will* ask you," Kate observed. "Or Jenny."

Gillie threw her a too-perceptive glance, and Kate remembered the other reason she'd chosen to accept the dinner invitation. She had to do it quickly before Wickenden joined them.

"I'm not here to cause trouble," she said abruptly.

Gillie blinked. "I didn't suppose you were."

"Didn't you?" Kate said with a faint twist of her lip. "It must have crossed your mind when I chose this place of all others to escape from my latest scandal."

Gillie's eyes fell. "I thought you might have needed a friend."

"Perhaps I did. I had a fond memory of Blackhaven and it had, besides, the added advantage of not being suggested by either my father or my late husband's family. I am, you must know, a perverse creature. But I wander from the point." She drew a deep breath. "Which is that I have no designs upon your husband. And if I did, he would not look at me. Our day, such as it was, past many years ago."

Gillie's eyes flew back to Kate, widening in surprise.

Kate gave her a sardonic smile. "I saw how you looked at me when I stayed at the castle. But you never had anything to fear."

Gillie was an open creature. Clearly she wanted to believe Kate, and yet there was a hint of skepticism in the twitch of her eyebrow.

"Didn't I?" Gillie asked lightly, echoing Kate's earlier words.

Kate shook her head. "I'll not deny that I went to Braithwaite Castle in the belief that Wickenden and I could make each other happy by being lovers at last. I even suggested it, if you want the truth, but he was already too deeply in love with you."

Gillie flushed at this revelation, but held Kate's gaze. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I value his friendship," Kate said frankly. "And yours."

Gillie's eyes widened further, but perhaps fortunately, Wickenden came bounding downstairs with his hat and his wife's bonnet and pelisse, putting an end to further confidences of this nature.

Clearly, she'd given Gillie food for thought for the younger woman was unusually quiet as they walked around the crescent toward High Street. It was possible Kate had shot herself in the foot, metaphorically

speaking, with her openness, which would be a pity considering what it had cost her to say the words. But she had too many other things on her mind to worry about that right now. She'd used a spare moment to try and do the right thing, but her chief focus was on Tristram Grant and Cornelius.

"Enough, Kate," Wickenden said at last. "What is going on? What is Tris Grant's connection to this escaped French prisoner?"

"He isn't French," Kate blurted. "He's English but couldn't admit it in front of his fellow prisoners for his own safety." She glanced around to be sure there was no one else within hearing distance and lowered her voice even further. "Tris—Mr. Grant—hid him at the vicarage. I need to warn him and get him away, somehow, which is difficult when he's injured, but hopefully the soldiers will be so busy chasing Tris that they won't notice Cornelius being driven off in the opposite direction."

To her annoyance, Gillie and Wickenden looked at each other. Kate supposed they were comparing silent notes on her levels of gullibility, until Gillie released her husband's arm and slipped around to Kate's other side.

"It so happens," Gillie murmured, "that we can hide him until he's well enough."

"And Tris, too, until we can sort this mess out," Wickenden added. His eyes gleamed. "Bring them to Blackhaven Cove after dark."

Kate stared at him. "There's no hiding place there!"

"*Au contraire*," Wickenden said distractedly. He turned suddenly, looking behind him. "Do you know, I believe someone is following us."

"Following me," Kate corrected. "I don't believe the new Baron Crowmore trusts me."

"What, does he think you're going to run off with the family silver?"

"Or that I'll produce the family an alternative heir."

Wickenden's gaze returned to her. "Is that likely?"

"He doesn't know. But he *really* doesn't want me palming off Vernon's bastard as Crowmore's son to displace him."

Gillie wrinkled her nose in distaste. "What horrid people they must be."

"There I have to agree with you," Kate replied. "Though, of course, I am prejudiced and no angel besides. Look, there's another, lounging by the coffee house. The town is full of his people." All waiting their moment to attack her, although she'd never involve Wickenden and Gillie by telling them so.

"Perhaps," Gillie said doubtfully. "But I'm sure he at least is not working for Crowmore. He was in my father's troop and would never

spy for a civilian.”

As if bearing her out, the burly man by the coffee shop, grinned and doffed his hat. “Evening, Miss Gillie!”

“Well,” Kate murmured, faintly amused. “You are clearly worth cultivating! So ... midnight?” she suggested. “Supposing I can find them.”

“Why don’t you let me find them?” Wickenden suggested. “I don’t want you running into trouble.”

“I won’t. We shall both look and hope one of us turns up with them!”

*

GILLIE AND WICKENDEN returned home via the vicarage, which was in darkness with no obvious signs of observers, and the harbor, which was quiet and peaceful enough to cause them to pause by the rail, overlooking the bobbing boats tied up there and the sea beyond.

Wickenden said idly, “No sign of any soldiers in the town. They must have all returned to barracks.”

“Hopefully without Mr. Grant. Though for his own sake, he shouldn’t have run.”

“I suspect he’s staying free to help this prisoner,” Wickenden said. “Whoever he is.”

“Do you believe that he isn’t French?” Gillie asked.

“I believe Grant’s capable of telling the difference.”

“And telling Kate the truth?”

“Trust me, Grant was always devastatingly honest,” Wickenden said dryly. “I can’t imagine his new calling has made a liar out of him.”

Gillie rested one hand on the rail beside his. “What was the late Lord Crowmore like?” she asked reluctantly.

Wickenden shrugged, “Never cared for him. But then I knew he made Kate unhappy.”

“In what way?”

“Being her husband,” Wickenden said dryly. “She knew she made a mistake a long time ago, but it was too late. She was trapped with him.”

“Then it was no more than that?”

“What do you mean?” He frowned down at her and she knew he didn’t really want to think about other people’s marital difficulties.

She took his hand, bringing it to her cheek. “I mean ... did he ... hurt her?”

“Christ, no,” David said in disgust. He scowled. “That is, he’d better not have.” He gazed at Gillie. “I wouldn’t know, would I? I’d be

the last person she'd tell. But knowing Kate, she'd have told no one. Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"I don't know," Gillie said restlessly, pulling him onward. "She just seems ... different. As if widowhood has freed her somehow. And she isn't playing the game, is she? She isn't bowing to convention and pretending to mourn to please convention. She's all but shouting that she doesn't care. As if she had enough lying when he was alive and now she's embracing the truth with a vengeance. I know she'll never say why, but it seems to be she's thumbing her nose at him, and at everyone who ever pressured her into this marriage."

David was silent, though he dragged her hand to his arm and held it there too tightly.

"I always thought she was surviving," he said, low. "She behaved badly, just like me, though always with just enough discretion to avoid notoriety. Until this last scandal, at least. I knew she was escaping. I just never understood what. I hope you're wrong, Gillie."

"So do I." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "But we can help her to help Mr. Grant, can't we?"

"Providing we're not aiding the enemy."

*

ON LEAVING GILLIE and Wickenden at the hotel door, Kate went straight to her rooms with the intention of changing into much less distinctive garments before it grew dark. She would then leave the hotel incognito and go to the vicarage in search of Cornelius. She suspected she would find Grant there, too, if only he'd managed to shake off the soldiers.

She used her key to open the door to her room. "Little? Light the candles, would you," she called, stripping off her gloves.

"Little isn't here," said a quite different voice, causing Kate to start and swing around.

Lord Vernon sat in the comfortable armchair, reading the newspaper she'd left on the table beside it. Over the top of it, he smiled in what he clearly imagined was a disarming manner.

"Where is Little?" she asked in a carefully calm voice.

"You gave her the evening off, remember? She's stepped out with one of the hotel staff. Very smart young man with shiny shoes."

Hiding her relief, Kate said, "How did you get in here?"

"I spoke nicely to the chamber maid."

"I hope you'll find her another position when she loses this one."

"Don't be like that, Kate, I need to see you."

"Your needs are not my concern. Get out, Vernon, before I ring and have you ejected."

“What, and set all those tongues wagging?”

Kate laughed, though it wasn't a pleasant sound. “At this stage in my life, do you really expect that to weigh with me?”

“I thought that was why you left London,” Vernon said, frowning with incomprehension. “To get away from gossip.”

“Vernon, you have no idea why I left London.” For the simple reason, he hadn't been around to find out.

“Tell me,” he invited.

“I've told you all I'm going to,” Kate said, moving toward the silken bell rope.

“No, wait,” he said, jumping to his feet. “Please, Kate, hear me out, and then, if you still want me to, I'll go.”

“Then hurry up,” she snapped. “I have an engagement.”

He scowled. “At this time of night?”

Kate laid her hand on the bell rope.

He threw up his hands in surrender. “All right, all right! Look, I came to see you so that we could reach an understanding. You know I adore you, Kate. Why don't we get married? Then all this fuss will die down.”

She had to allow him that one. Finally, he had truly surprised her.

She blinked at him. “Married?”

“Married.” His eyes twinkled in a way which had once beguiled her, even knowing there was no substance behind the mischief. “What do you say?”

“What I was taught to,” Kate replied. “While being sensible of the honor *et cetera, et cetera*, I thank you but no. Now, it is past time for you to go.”

“You didn't even think about it,” Vernon said indignantly.

“I've thought about it and rejected it every day since my first marriage.”

“Not with me!”

Kate narrowed her eyes. “I've given you the civil answer. Don't make me add the uncivil one.”

“Kate!” he expostulated. “Can't you see it's the perfect solution? Even your father agrees.”

Kate, who'd begun to walk to the door, paused. “My father? My father sent you up here to offer me marriage?”

“Not exactly.” Vernon shifted his feet, then came toward her. “But he approves.”

“Goodbye, Vernon,” Kate said firmly, opening the door to the passage.

He had little choice, so he tried to make it as dignified as possible.

“I know you're mine, Kate,” he said as he passed her.

Kate closed the door behind him and shut her eyes. She wanted to

scream.

Then she remembered she had more important things to do.

*

GRANT, HAVING ABANDONED the military carriage on the Carlisle road, fortuitously beside the tracks of another carriage which had recently travelled in the same direction, had doubled back to town through the woods and made his way to the hotel via the back streets.

His need to protect Kate was powerful, over-riding even his care for Cornelius who could be captured, trapped, or injured. Possibly because he was the one who'd asked her, however silently, to take care of his brother. But that was before he'd realized that the villains who'd first attacked her were not still in Blackhaven after all but had also worked to get him out of the way—presumably so they could have another shot at Kate.

He slipped into the hotel the same way he'd sent Kate a couple of days before—via the kitchen garden—lifting an amiable finger to his lips to anyone who saw him. He was the curate, and most of them came to church at least once a month. They just smiled and nodded, and he made his way through the kitchen to the main part of the hotel. He knew from some amusing tale she'd told over dinner that her rooms were on the first floor, at the front of the hotel. He resolved to lurk in the passage and wait until either she or the maid appeared.

There was a chair and a table at the end of the passage, so he sat with relief and stretched out his legs. It had been a hard, crazy ride followed by a long walk, and he was glad of the rest.

He didn't have long to wait before the sound of her voice jerked him fully alert. He couldn't make out the words, just the timbre of her voice, inducing electric tingles that seemed to roll out to his toes. Then the door half way along the passage opened and of all people, his half-brother Vernon stepped out.

"I know you're mine, Kate," Vernon said throbbingly and sauntered off along the passage.

Even from the back view he had, Grant knew his brother was smirking. He always smirked at the thought of conquest.

Grant wanted to run at him, smash the chair he was sitting in over Vernon's head. But in truth, he felt as if his very bones were crumbling in misery and loss. He couldn't move.

He didn't care about her past. He never had. Whatever the truths and motives, he'd always known that none of it could damage her in his eyes. It was part of who she was. What he hadn't bargained on was that it would spill into her present, her present with him.

That he knew he was being ridiculous didn't help.

He staggered to his feet and shook himself, much like a dog. Vernon's presence changed nothing important. He still had to warn Kate of her danger, and then he had to get Cornelius to safety.

The arrival of an elderly lady and a young companion making their slow way to the room across the passage from Kate's, held him back. He stood gazing down at the magazine on the little table, his back to them, until the door closed behind them. Then he walked to Kate's door, raised his hand and took a deep breath.

The door flew open and Kate gasped. In a modest black dress with a matching veil drawn over her face and a dark cloak around her shoulders, she was almost unrecognizable. Apart from her amazing eyes shining through the veil. They could only be Kate's eyes.

"Tristram," she whispered. "Oh, thank God." She seized his hand in a grip that hurt and yet it soothed Grant's pain as words could not. "Are you hurt?"

He shook his head.

"And Cornelius?"

"I don't know yet. I'm on my way to find him. Listen, you must keep indoors until I can deal with this. Our friends from the other night are still in Blackhaven, and it's my belief they were behind tonight's little theatre."

She frowned. "They set the soldiers on you?"

"To get me out of the way. I'm sure of it. They must have been watching both of us. One was certainly smirking in the street when the soldiers arrested me,"

"That was why you ran!" As if suddenly aware of her powerful, almost desperate grip on his hand, she released it. Her breath caught in something close to laughter. "I didn't know whether to laugh or scold you, for in truth it was ridiculously funny."

He allowed himself a quick grin. "Bizarrely fun, too, though I suspect getting out of it won't be. I have to go."

"I know," she said in surprise, stepping out and closing the door behind her.

"Kate—"

"We have a perfect solution," she confided, locking the door. "I'll tell you as we go."

"Kate, it's best if you stay here."

"No, it isn't," she said flatly. "You may protect me if necessary."

With some idea of blocking her departure, he stood his ground, which brought her far too close to him as she turned from the door. At once vital and vulnerable, she gazed up at him, and his mouth went dry. Even veiled, she was so damnably lovely. Her body just grazed his at breast and hip, setting his pulse afire. He wanted to seize her in his arms, push her back into her room. He wanted her naked under

him while he made wild love to her, obliterating everything and everyone else from her mind.

Behind the veil, he imagined her eyes darkened. She had to be aware of his lust, for her breathing had quickened, whether with fear or desire he had no idea. Or time to find out.

Besides, he wanted her with him. Whatever her relationship with Vernon, he wanted to have adventures with her, just be with her, looking out for her.

He swallowed. "Come then." Forcing his heavy body to move, he stepped back and walked with difficulty toward the staircase. Every nerve in his body screamed for her. Her presence at his side, so close and so untouchable, was pleasure and pain, a torture he never wanted to forego.

The foyer was quiet. The clerk at the reception desk barely looked up. Kate drew the hood of her cloak up over her hair like a cowl. She even hunched her shoulders slightly and it came to Grant that she looked at last like a grieving widow.

"Did you practice that in front of a mirror?" he breathed.

"For years."

"And then decided not to bother?"

Her gaze flickered up to him. "Exactly."

Sparrow came inside as they crossed the foyer. He barely glanced at Kate, but murmured to Grant, "Soldiers gone back to barracks. They won't know you're here. Regiment here's gone to hell since the colonel went to war."

"Thank you," Grant murmured, touched to have the grizzled old soldier on his side. He liked Blackhaven and would be sorry to leave.

Sparrow cast a quick glance around, then dragged Grant behind the pillar nearest the door, "Here," he said gruffly, handing him a coat and hat just like his own. "Put this on if you want to remain incognito."

Grant's breath caught. He didn't know if it was laughter or gratitude. Both probably. But this should get him out of the hotel if anyone was watching.

"Don't let the lady leave without me," he breathed to Sparrow, dragging off his own coat.

A few moment later, he emerged from the pillar wearing the doorman's ill-fitting spare coat, with his own carelessly crumpled over his arm, and his hat hidden beneath it. Ignoring him, Kate walked through the front door behind Sparrow, who tipped his hat to her politely.

Grant clapped Sparrow's hat on his head, tipping it low, and sauntered out. "Thanks for this, Sparrow. I'll bring it back." Hopefully to any watchers, it would look like a comradely goodnight. But as he

spoke, he glanced around the street, taking in the coffee house where one of his own watchers still lurked, and the few respectable passersby.

Although it was dark, this part of High Street was well lit from the hotel and coffee house, as well as by several street lamps. A carriage rumbled harmlessly by. A loafer leaned in a doorway, picking his teeth ... a loafer who was not the man Grant had seen in Cliff Crescent but who looked very like one of the other men who'd attacked Kate.

The man didn't seem to notice either Kate or himself. Neither did Grant's own watchers. None of them followed her; her disguise was too good. Grant swaggered up High Street behind her. Only when he turned into the darker town square did he shrug off the borrowed coat and hat, and don his own, while Kate waited, apparently supporting herself with one black-gloved hand on the back of a wooden bench.

"I could like you as a doorman," she murmured as they walked on, side by side. "The uniform suits you."

"I'd say the widow's weeds suit you too, but I'd be lying."

"The doorman could lie," she said severely. "The clergyman may not."

Still quartering the ground constantly, Grant walked with her around the square toward the church and the vicarage behind it. No one followed.

Kate confessed taking Wickenden and Gillie into her confidence, at least to some extent, and told him about their offer to hide Grant and Cornelius.

"Hide us where?" Grant asked, baffled. "If we're found in their house—"

"I don't believe they mean the house. We have to go to Blackhaven Cove."

He glanced at her. "They're going to send us away on a smuggling vessel?"

"What an adventure that would be. I might join you."

He didn't want to think about being alone with Kate at sea for several days. But the idea hovered around the edges of his imagination as he focused on the work in hand.

The vicarage was still in darkness. They approached it from the churchyard, looking for any signs of soldiers or watchers of any other kind. Shadows seemed to move among the tombstones. It might have been the small animals Grant could hear scuttling in the undergrowth. But when he heard a distinctly human voice, he snatched Kate to his side, dragging her backward behind the large Braithwaite grave stone, pressing them both into the covering shadows.

Her heart drummed against his, her breasts rising and falling with her quickened breath.

Someone was definitely moving along the path close by. A male voice rumbled quietly, growing nearer. But surely, it was only one set of footsteps shuffling along. And he knew the voice. Old Pat, a one-time soldier who had a tiny hut up toward the abbey, but who spent most of the summer months sleeping rough wherever he dropped. More often than not, that was here in the churchyard.

In relief, Grant put his mouth next to Kate's ear. It was easy to find since her hood had fallen back when he'd grabbed her. She smelled delicious, like orange blossom and vanilla. Expensive, exotic perfume, and yet beneath it, something all her own. Just Kate.

"He's harmless," he breathed. "We'll just let him pass."

She shivered, perhaps in response to his breath in her ear. He wanted to touch the lobe with his tongue, even through the fine, gauze veil. To avoid temptation, he shifted his head slightly, but that only brought her jaw and her mouth more easily within his reach.

By the light of the moon, her eyes glowed behind the veil, watching him intently. He didn't know if it was anticipation or fear. Or both. His body burned at the proximity of hers, hardened with every rise and fall of her breasts. Vernon had come for her, had been admitted to her bedchamber. God help him, he didn't care.

Old Pat shuffled past, singing softly to himself. The moment was almost past. Grant couldn't help it. He dipped his head the last inch and covered her veiled mouth with his.

Chapter Nine

SHE HADN'T EXPECTED that. She might have fantasized just a little that when the stranger had finally gone, Grant might lift her veil and kiss her. She never expected him to kiss her *through* it. And she certainly had no idea of the strange, arousing pleasure the barrier could conjure.

Enough of his hot, firm lips touched her for her to taste him. Through the gauze, his mouth opened hers, his warm breath on her tongue, which suddenly met the tip of his as he softly explored the gauze. A strange, sweet kiss, slowly engulfing and inflaming her.

Trapped between the cold stone behind her and his hard body, she kissed him back, lost in his heat, mouth, and her own unending lust. He made her feel things she never had before. Closeness, a desire so powerful she'd have accepted him there and then with joy, against a respected family's tombstone.

"Kate," he breathed into her mouth. "You tie me in knots..."

"Then you shouldn't stand so close," she managed.

"You didn't appear to mind."

"I don't," she said honestly.

He straightened a little, resting his forehead against hers and slowly detaching his body from hers. She felt cold and disappointed and exhilarated all at once. "Let's find Cornelius," he muttered. "And then..."

"Then?" she prompted as they moved between the stones, hand-in-hand.

"Take him to the cove," Grant said with peculiar ruefulness.

He became instantly more businesslike, peering into the darkness, listening for movement before finally approaching the front door, opening it with a key, and slipping inside with Kate at his heels. It was black when he closed the door on the moonlight. She thought she could hear his heart and her own.

He moved away from her, fumbling with a tinder box and flint she couldn't see. A moment later, light flared and he lit the three candles in the candelabra standing by the door. Holding it high, he walked through the public rooms on the ground floor.

"Cornelius?" he called softly. Finding no sign of him, they climbed the stairs to what had become his bedchamber. The door stood ajar, and Grant pushed it wide. It was in darkness and, when Grant shone

the candles around it, quite empty.

"There's mud on the floor," Kate said. "I think the soldiers came."

"But couldn't find him," Grant said. "And moved on to me."

"They could have come back here for him after they lost you. They might have caught him unaware."

Grant nodded acknowledgement of the possibility. "I'll check my own chamber." He lit a candle by the bedside and gave it to Kate. "Will you check the other bedrooms?"

"Of course."

While he vanished around a corner at the end of the passage, Kate looked in the other bedrooms—one with a dressing room, belonging to the vicar and his wife, others for their two daughters. She even called Cornelius's name a couple of times, but there was no sign of him.

She emerged into the passage again to find Grant opening the attic door. "Cornelius always went *up* when we played hide and seek."

"Which way did you go?" she asked, following up some steps and into an attic storeroom.

"Out, if I could," he replied, glancing into the servants' bedrooms.

Kate prowled the storeroom, looking behind old chairs and desks and trunks and even a hobby horse.

"Cornelius," she called.

Grant returned, shining a brighter light on the dusty treasure trove.

On impulse, Kate glanced upward, holding her candle higher to illuminate a square piece of wood in the ceiling. "Tristram. Is that a trap door? There must be a space above this."

Grant handed her the candelabra and pulled a trunk under the possible trap door before jumping on top of it and reaching above his head. The wooden square shifted. Kate held her breath while he shoved it aside. She stepped closer, shining the candles upward and into the space above.

A low cry escaped her lips, for the light flickered over the pale, still figure of Cornelius.

Without a word, Grant reached up and hauled himself upward and into the roof space, no easy physical feat from so far below. Kate's heart beat with uncertainty as he bent over his lifeless brother.

"Is he...?" she whispered.

"Dead?" Grant said. "God, no, he's asleep, the bastard. Excuse my language."

"Certainly," Kate said in relief.

"There's a ladder up here. I'm going to drop it down."

A few seconds later, he simply slung his brother over his shoulder and began to climb down the ladder. Kate backed out of his way.

"He's very sound asleep," she observed.

"He always slept like the dead. In this case, I expect he exhausted himself getting up here."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to wake him up and make him climb down himself?" Kate suggested.

"Maybe, but I'd rather check his wound while he's still unconscious."

Kate lit the way down the attic stairs and back to Cornelius's bedchamber, where Grant deposited his burden on the bed. Cornelius wore only shirt and breeches. Without ceremony, Grant pulled up the shirt. Beneath it, the bandages still looked pristine.

"It looks like he didn't open the wound again," Grant said in relief. "I'll leave it to Dr. Lampton later. Now, where's that bowl of water?"

"Don't you dare," Cornelius said strongly, opening both eyes.

"I knew you were awake," Grant said with satisfaction, "you lazy, ill-gotten—"

"Only just," Cornelius protested. "There were soldiers swarming all over the house, Tris. Your Mrs. Walsh gave them what for, I can tell you."

"I imagine she did. Are you up to a short walk, Cornelius?"

"Where to?" he asked suspiciously.

"To the beach," Kate said. "It's a wonderful night for a stroll."

*

IT WAS AN unexpectedly hilarious journey, even though it could have ended badly at any moment. As they made their way through the churchyard, supporting Cornelius between them, Kate noticed a man walking past in the street.

"He's a town watchman," Grant murmured, dropping behind a much smaller tombstone than the one which had sheltered them on the way in. "Probably looking for us, if the soldiers involved them."

"Is that why we stumbled about in the vicarage in the dark?" Kate asked.

"Yes."

"Anyone would think you'd done this before."

"Oh, he has," Cornelius assured her. "He may be a prim-faced vicar these days, but he used to be amusing occasionally. Why does a lady with your charm and beauty spend even a moment with—"

"Shut up, Cornelius," Grant interrupted. "If it wasn't for her, you'd have been arrested before you even reached the vicarage."

"I never said she wasn't helpful. Only that she's too beautiful for you."

"Being a clergyman," Kate explained. "And therefore, unable to appreciate mere fleshly beauty."

“Don’t say *fleshly* when you’re so close to me,” Cornelius begged.

Grant slapped the back of his head. “Come on.”

In this way, starting and stopping, and occasionally hiding behind hedges and walls, they made their way away toward the beach and down the path to Blackhaven Cove. If any smuggling vessels lurked at sea, they showed no lights. On the other hand, neither was there any sign of Gillie or Wickenden.

“What time is it?” Kate asked.

Grant pulled out his fob watch, holding it up to the erratic moonlight. “Five minutes to midnight.”

Kate leaned against a rock and pushed back her hood and veil. “Well, we seem to have fitted a lot into the evening,” she observed. “Life is never dull in Blackhaven, is it?”

“Alas, you have turned so provincial, my dear,” drawled a quite different male voice.

“David?” Kate said, straightening and looking around rather wildly. She jumped as the figure loomed out of nowhere between her and Cornelius.

“Where the devil did you come from?” Grant demanded, throwing up one arm to shield his eyes from the sudden lantern light. Gillie emerged closely behind her husband.

Gillie grinned. “Cave,” she murmured. “In here.”

By the glow of her lantern, everyone followed her into what had seemed a shallow indent in the rock. It was, in fact, a good-sized cave.

“It’s well hidden,” Gillie said. “You can’t be seen from the sea or the road, or even from the beach so long as you don’t stick your head out.”

“It’s an excellent cave,” Grant approved. “And I thank you—we both thank you!—for showing it to us. We can stay here tonight and move on before it’s light.”

“You could,” Gillie allowed. “But that wasn’t really my plan. Do you need to rest, sir?” The last was spoken to Cornelius, who seemed to be leaning much more heavily on Grant.

“Sorry. Weak as a kitten.” Cornelius cast a pretty good effort at a smile, but it was clear he was exhausted.

Wickenden handed him a flask and won a better effort.

However, Cornelius paused with the flask at his lips, then swallowed and lowered it, staring. “Wickenden. You’re Lord Wickenden.”

“I confess,” Wickenden said easily. “And this lady is my wife. But you have the advantage.”

“Cornelius Fanshawe.” The injured man held out his hand, though when Wickenden took it, he used the grip to lever himself into a straighter position to bow to Lady Wickenden.

“Fanshawe?” Wickenden repeated. “Then you’re one of the Earl of Boulton’s sons?”

“Sadly, yes.”

Wickenden eased him back into a sitting position against the cave wall, glancing at Grant as though for confirmation.

Grant nodded once and looked away. It crossed Kate’s mind he was dreading the next revelation.

“I see.” Wickenden leaned one shoulder on the wall. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems there’s no point in your hiding. Just tell them who you are. Grant, clearly, can vouch for you. He’s a clergyman; his word will count.”

Or would have counted, before he’d bolted with the soldiers’ horses and carriage.

Cornelius gave a lopsided smile. “Grant doesn’t really want to vouch for me, and I can’t say I blame him. It’ll bring my father here post-haste and trust me, none of us want that.”

Gillie crouched down beside him, frowning. “You’re causing all this because you’re afraid of your father?”

“Petrified,” Cornelius confessed.

“Not entirely,” Grant said abruptly. “He’s covering for me.”

Kate stared at him. There was more here than just avoiding scandal. She hadn’t seen it before, hadn’t really looked beyond the French spy theory, because in truth, she just wanted to be with Grant.

“For *you*?” Wickenden frowned at Grant, his face particularly devilish in the upward light from the lantern.

“I’m his half-brother,” Grant said reluctantly. “On the wrong side of the blanket. I went into the Church without my father’s help and very much against his wishes.”

They were both scared of Lord Boulton? Well, so was Vernon, but Kate couldn’t help being very slightly disappointed in Grant.

“You’re both so afraid of him?” Gillie said aloud.

“I am,” Cornelius said cheerfully. “Tris ain’t. He just has some prideful notion of doing this on his own. And not letting my father spoil his position here.”

“Would Lord Boulton do that?” Gillie asked, amazed.

“Oh yes,” Cornelius said fervently. “If Tris don’t toe the line. Which he won’t, being as stubborn as the old man and quite devoted to the idea of frittering his life away in poverty as a lower clergyman.”

“It’s all appallingly selfish,” Grant said uncomfortably. “And I’m sorry for involving you. All of you. It isn’t really quite such a matter of life and death as you might have imagined, only I’d rather the soldiers didn’t shoot Cornelius on sight.”

“*You’d* rather?” Cornelius interjected.

Kate let out a breath of laughter and patted his arm in a sisterly

kind of way. "We'd all rather, though God knows why. It all seems quite reasonable to me, Gillie. Families—some families—need to be kept much farther off than arm's length."

Gillie blinked at her. Grant turned his head in the gloom, gazing at her. Kate pretended not to see.

"You have a good family," she told Gillie. "So does David, for the most part, as I'm sure you're discovering. Not everyone is so fortunate. Some of us have to struggle to find our way in spite of family. We don't all do it so well, or so gracefully, as Mr. Grant."

In the silence, Cornelius peered at her. "You *do* like him, don't you? Even as a vicar."

"Curate," Kate corrected mildly, and was rewarded by Grant's snort of laughter.

"Who the devil *are* you?" Cornelius asked, glancing from his brother back to her.

"Since you ask so civilly, I'm Kate Crowmore."

Cornelius blinked in clear amazement. "What, Vernon's Kate?"

This time, the silence was a lot more tense than thoughtful. Cornelius had been in France for several months, isolated from family and friends, yet even he knew about the scandal.

Grant had gone very still. And Kate remembered all over again that Vernon had come to Blackhaven with the intention of marrying her. "*I know you're mine, Kate.*"

"No," she said between her teeth.

Wickenden stirred. "What a small world it is for the rich and privileged. Shall we move on?"

"Move on where?" Grant asked.

"Did you imagine we'd expect you to sleep in a cave?" Wickenden drawled. "Though it's true you and I have slept in worse places. This is Gillie's secret, so if any of you breathes a word, I'll track you down and hurt you."

"Even me?" Kate said lightly.

"Especially you. I'll steal your horses."

"Brute," said Kate. "Oh my, is this a secret passage?"

"It is," Gillie confessed, lighting the way to the back where she seemed to vanish into the rock, except for the lantern's glow which showed the way into a widening stone passage.

Kate whistled, a trick learned from her brothers in childhood. "Where does it lead?"

"Into our cellar," Gillie confessed. "Which isn't actually too cold or damp at this time of year."

"Gillie made you up some comfortable quarters there," Wickenden said.

"Unfortunately, the house is quite full these days," Gillie said

apologetically, “and there are a couple of new servants whose silence we can’t quite rely on yet. Otherwise you could have stayed upstairs and just hidden when the Watch came round.”

Kate glanced at her with new curiosity. “Does the Watch come round a lot?”

“Used to,” Gillie said with a quick, rueful smile. “When Bernie and I held our card parties, and they tried to prove we were an illegal gambling house. And then we had to hide a wounded smuggler once.” She cast a glance over her shoulder at Cornelius. “He survived.”

Grant laughed.

*

THE SPACE GILLIE had made up for the fugitives was just behind the main cellar. There were two truckle beds with sheets and blankets, a slightly rusty lamp, a selection of books, a washing bowl on top of an upturned barrel, and a small table with a jug of water, a loaf of bread, and some cold meats and cheese.

Cornelius all but tumbled onto one of the beds. Grant pulled off his brother’s boots and covered him.

“I wish Dr. Morton had not been sent abroad,” Gillie said anxiously. “I know he would have looked after Mr. Fanshawe with discretion.”

“Dr. Lampton has seen him,” Grant assured her. “I think he’s just exhausted and will be fine after more rest. If he gets worse, I’ll fetch Lampton to him—he is also the soul of discretion.” He straightened and took Gillie’s hand. “Thank you for everything. It can hardly be the homecoming you wished for.”

Gillie laughed. “Actually, your adventures make it seem a lot *more* like home. Is there anything else you require?”

“Nothing. Thank you.”

“Then we’ll leave you to sleep.”

Taking the lantern, she led the way out to the main cellar.

“Thank you, Kate,” Grant said softly. “Again.”

She didn’t want thanks. She wanted a moment, several moments, or even hours, alone with him. But Gillie and Wickenden waited for her.

“Thank *you*,” she said. “I haven’t had so much fun since my brothers and I hid from the gamekeeper.”

“I won’t ask why.”

“Best not. Good night, Mr. Grant. I’ll call back in the morning ... from one direction or another.”

“Be careful,” he warned.

“Oh, I always am,” she said, tapping her reticule where the pistol

lay. Since it was all she could do, she gave him a smile and a mocking bow, and walked away, past Wickenden who waited with another lantern.

"Keith?" Grant said behind her. "Make sure she gets home safely?"

"Of course."

For the second time that evening, Kate left the Muirs' house in Cliff Crescent, this time escorted only by Wickenden. She had tried to dissuade him, though to no avail.

"He's afraid for you," Wickenden observed as they walked around the crescent. "Beyond the normal protective instincts of a gentleman."

"Surely not."

"Are you in trouble, Kate?"

She didn't want him or Gillie involved with the Crowmores, so she turned it off with humor. "Beyond the scandal that seems less and less important? And aiding fugitives, of course. You'll note I combat those in the guise of a prostrate widow."

"It's very good," Wickenden allowed, casting a glance over her veil, hood, and bent demeanor. "Though since you are the least prostrate widow I have ever met, it makes me want to laugh."

"Don't," she said flippantly. "You'll spoil everything."

"And what exactly is everything? What is Tris Grant to you?"

"A good friend."

Wickenden looked at her. "You won't hurt him, will you?"

She drew in her breath. "Of course I will. It's what I do."

"Kate."

"What?" she said aggressively. Then, perhaps tiredness caught up with her, for uncharacteristic tears struggled into her throat. She fought them back fiercely. "I should leave him alone, shouldn't I?"

"If you're playing with him, yes. He's Vernon's brother, for God's sake."

"Don't remind me," she whispered. "Oh God, David, how have I made such a mess of everything?"

Although she couldn't look at him, lest he saw the tears she couldn't prevent swelling in her eyes, she felt his perceptive gaze on her face.

"I don't believe you have," he murmured. "Yet."

Yet. She laughed, a short, brittle sound she didn't much care for, though it was the best she could do.

"Vernon is here," she said abruptly. "He turned up without a word, let alone invitation. He says he wants to marry me."

"It would be the best way to silence the scandal," he allowed.

"To be admitted back into the fashionable world of hedonism and polite deceit? Where no one is ever truly your friend? Why does that not sound as tempting as it used to?"

“Because you’re bored with it?” he suggested.

She glanced at him at last. “As you were?”

“I was only ever pretending.”

“If it’s any consolation,” she said with difficulty. “I hurt myself more than I hurt you.”

“I know. And if we’d married, I’d never have met Gillie.”

“Yes, you would. You’d just have loved her from afar. One way or another, we’d have made each other miserable in the end.”

“We would.” He turned the corner in silence. “But I don’t believe you’d make Tris miserable. If you loved him.”

The tears surged back into her throat, but she spoke through the ache. “I am not capable of love.”

Wickenden only smiled. She could hear it in his voice. “You mean you haven’t encountered many people worthy of it. It’s not the same thing.”

Chapter Ten

KATE ROSE SOMEWHAT later than normal the following day. Having instructed Little to arrange a late breakfast for her return, she paused by the door.

“How was your evening?” she asked.

The question was unusual enough to drop Little’s jaw, though she recovered quickly. “Very pleasant, my lady. Drake is a good man and makes me laugh. Though he’s younger than me.”

“Does that matter?” Kate asked lightly. “Especially if he makes you laugh.”

“Lord Vernon don’t make you laugh anymore,” Little blurted.

Kate wasn’t sure he ever had. She couldn’t remember any more why she’d picked him above the others clamoring for her attention. Perhaps she’d seen something of his brother in him.

“He came again last night,” Little added. “I told him you were out and sent him away.”

“He talked one of the staff into letting him back in when we were both out,” Kate said grimly. “But I don’t believe he’ll repeat the offence. You might make it known that I’ll see to the dismissal of anyone who misuses a key to these rooms again.”

“I know just who to speak to,” Little said with relish.

Kate left her to it, and set off for her planned morning ride.

As soon as she stepped out of the hotel, she saw one of the men who’d attacked her. He lurked in the doorway across the road, watching her between the people and carts and horses who passed along the road. A quick glance showed another burly man emerging from the coffee house. She’d seen him before, imagined he was following her, though he didn’t look like one of the original four attackers.

She was glad she’d instructed Peter to bring Snow to the hotel. The groom rode Gladiator. Between him and her pistol, she imagined she was safe. In any case, it wasn’t in her nature to give in. Peter boosted her into the saddle and she gathered in the reins, turning the horse, and setting off up the street so that she walked right by her attacker. She made sure she caught his eye, which fell almost immediately, although he didn’t move away. With luck, it would frighten him off, knowing she could report him to the authorities. Perhaps she should, and to the devil with everyone gossiping here, too.

Although she kept her eyes peeled, and *might* have seen one of the other attackers in a side street, she refused to look behind her.

“Peter, is anyone following us?” she asked the groom instead.

“Couple of leery looking coves. But we’ll lose ’em soon enough. They’re only on foot.”

Breaking into open country and giving the horses their heads felt like a massive relief. She rode up beyond Braithwaite Castle to admire the fine view over the rolling hills and the sea. She wondered if Lady Braithwaite would have received her now, were she in residence. Probably not, since she’d crossed the invisible line from discrete misbehavior to getting caught.

Refusing to feel sorry for herself, Kate thought she might like to paint the scene before her. She’d bring her easel up here one day.

She rode on just a little farther, before turning Snow’s head back toward Blackhaven. She was just wondering whether she could return along the beach from the castle, when a familiar figure rode into view.

Lord Vernon, who’d clearly spotted her from the road, cantered to intercept her.

“Well met, Kate!” he called cheerfully.

Kate nodded distantly.

“Is this Braithwaite’s pile, then?”

Again, she nodded. Vernon turned his horse beside her and spoke over his shoulder to Peter. “Off you go.”

“Peter is staying,” Kate snapped irritably. “And you will oblige me by not giving orders to my servants.”

“Have it your way,” Vernon said, clearly miffed. “I just thought you might prefer to have our discussion in private.”

“I don’t prefer to discuss anything with you. I prefer, in fact, to ride alone. Good morning.”

He reached out, hastily catching Snow’s bridle when she would have urged the horse into a gallop. “Kate. We need to talk about babies.”

Kate, who’d raised her whip in fury and was about to whack it down on his arm, paused in something like shock.

She lowered her arm. “Get off, Vernon. You’re upsetting Snow. I find that a very odd topic for you. Or me. I know nothing of infants.”

“And what if you’re having one? What if you are *enceinte*?”

She stared at him. “Then a few months after the birth I will be in a better position to discuss babies.”

“You’re being obtuse.”

“One of us is. I have nothing to say to you.”

“If you’re carrying a child, you must marry me.”

“Must I?” she said dangerously.

“Of course, you must. No one will believe it’s Crowmore’s, so it

will need the protection of my name. Besides, a child needs a father."

Kate sighed. "And you stand rather in need of my money. Controlling the Crowmore fortune would no doubt be a useful bonus, though it's not as much as you might think."

Vernon flushed, and she laughed, knowing she'd hit the nail on the head.

"I won't deny I'm in a pickle," he managed with some dignity. "But that has no bearing on my offer. My father will bail me out eventually—when he dies if not before. You know I adore you, Kate. We belonged to each other long before your husband died."

"No, we didn't, Vernon," she said tiredly. "We used each other, for amusement and fashion, and now it's over. You must marry one day for your family, and I will never remarry. Let us part as friends, or have nothing more to do with each other."

"Kate, please," he said urgently. "Let me give you this protection."

His expression was a trifle desperate as he grasped her seriousness, but more than that, there was a hint of genuine anxiety in his gaze. He was Grant's brother, a pale echo; but surely there was something of him there—whatever it was that had attracted her to him in the first place.

"Protection?" she repeated. Where was everyone when she truly needed protection from her husband?

Vernon swiped off his hat and dragged his hand through his hair. "I don't trust Dickie Crowmore." He clapped the hat back on his head. "He's a nasty piece of work. And he *truly* needs the money. Frankly, he makes me look like a miser—or at least like a responsible gentleman. Dickie *needs* the Crowmore fortune and he really ain't going to be pleased if you produce an heir. Marry me and he can always insist the child is mine. After all, old Crowmore gave you no children in eight years of marriage."

Kate sensed her father's influence here, for Vernon knew only too well that she wouldn't be producing *his* child. The world knew she rarely entered the same house as her husband, and yet she'd done so a week before he died. To see if he really was ill. Gossip had spoken of a reconciliation, though in fact, she'd barely stayed half an hour and most of that had been seeing to the servants.

She regarded Vernon dispassionately. "It's all muddled up in you, isn't it? Self-interest and doing the right thing. You're not really a bad man. But I don't love you. And I won't marry you for any reason."

She urged Snow to a gallop, leaving Vernon to follow or not as he pleased.

LATER IN THE day, after stopping at the pump room to take the waters and listen to the town gossip, Kate allowed herself to call in Cliff Crescent.

The door was opened by a large, ferocious looking individual who, on hearing her name, grunted and said, "They're in the cellar, m'lady. This way."

A quick glance showed Kate that no other more respectable servants lurked in the hallway. Nor did any of the family, although she could hear the baby crying somewhere in the bowels of the house. In any other establishment, being invited into the cellar by such a man would have sent her backing out of the front door again, especially given her circumstances. And yet here, in Gillie's house, she blithely followed the villainous old soldier down the stairs and preceded him through the door he unlocked for her.

At once voices and laughter greeted her. She made her way through the barrels of no doubt smuggled wine and brandy toward the "bedchamber", listening to the voices of Gillie, Grant, and Cornelius. It all seemed to be lighthearted and amusing and yet Kate felt a tightening in her chest that amounted to pain. Or fear. That Gillie would win Grant, too.

She brushed the stupid thought away. In her heart, she welcomed the happiness Wickenden had found with Gillie. As for Grant, she had no reason and less business to be jealous. Whatever his past, he would not now indulge in *affaires*. It would be marriage or nothing. And Kate would never marry. They had no future together.

Still, knowing all that, her heart beat like a rabbit's as she advanced and turned the corner.

Cornelius was sitting up in his makeshift bed, looking little the worse for wear. Grant, fully dressed, sat on his own bed, smiling at Gillie's last words. His gaze lifted and found her, and his smile broadened, dazzling her as he rose and bowed.

"Lady Crowmore."

What was the matter with her, that one smile could reduce her to this? A mere jelly of longing and gladness. Fortunately, Gillie and Cornelius's greetings distracted her and she sat beside Gillie on Grant's bed, while Grant sprawled across Cornelius's.

"The town is outraged on your behalf," Kate told Grant, stripping off her gloves. "At least, most of it is. There are a few doubters who insist the soldiers must have got their information from somewhere and that there is no smoke without fire. But the majority believe you innocent and want the soldiers who tried to arrest you court martialed and shot. Rumor says Major Doverton is furious with the officer who arrested you in Captain Muir's home, but that may not be true."

"Sounds like you've made an impression on the good people of

Blackhaven,” Cornelius said, apparently amused. “How gullible!”

“Well, they still want you captured, drowned, or shot,” Kate reported. “I’m not sure whether that makes them gullible or not.”

“Neither am I,” Cornelius confessed.

“Would you like some tea?” Gillie asked civilly.

“Oh, no thank you—I feel I’m already drowning in Blackhaven water! I just dropped in to exchange news. I see that our patient is doing better.”

“He is, I think,” Gillie agreed. “But Mr. Grant is restless. I’ve suggested a walk on the beach, if he’s careful.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Kate agreed.

“Perhaps you have time, now?” Grant said to her at once.

“Perhaps I do.” She hid the quickening of her heart in a drawl. “Gillie?”

“Oh no,” Gillie said at once. “I have promised Aunt Margaret to visit friends with her today.”

Grant lit the lantern from the lamp via a taper, and Kate walked beside him into the tunnel. She felt self-conscious, even though Gillie had shut the heavy door behind them.

“Is everything well with you?” he asked almost at once.

“I have not been attacked, if that’s what you mean,” she assured him. “Although there seem to be men all over the town following me, which is a trifle disconcerting.”

“Ah.” For once, his expression betrayed discomfort. “I’m afraid some of that is my fault. After the attack, I asked a few friends to look out for you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “From the coffee shop? Large, soldierly types?”

“For the most part.”

She didn’t know if she was more touched or annoyed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. But I couldn’t let you be hurt, either.”

She scowled. “Everyone in the world isn’t your responsibility, you know.”

In the lantern’s pale light, his eyes seemed to glow, warm and exciting, scattering her spurt of anger. Then his eyelids fell, like curtains. “Perhaps it comes with the vocation.”

It deprived her of breath, like a sword through the heart.

“Just another lame duck,” she mocked, when she could speak. “How lowering to be just like everyone else in the end. Do you kiss me just to make me feel better?”

A sound like a groan spilled from him. He swung on her, pinning her to the cold, damp wall of the tunnel. “I kiss you to make you love

me," he ground out. "But I can't, can I?"

His head swooped, blocking out the swinging lantern light as he crushed her lips beneath his. Her mouth opened wide under the force of it. His body flattened her to the wall and lust surged so quickly she moaned into his mouth. Pinioned by his hips and the fast-growing hardness between, she knew an instant of triumph and joy. And then it was over.

He stepped back so quickly she nearly sagged to the tunnel floor. Her knees trembled.

"Forgive me," he said raggedly. "Did I hurt you?"

"Do you take me for a piece of porcelain?" she managed. "Or a sheltered girl just out of the schoolroom?"

"Don't," he begged. She thought his eyes were closed as he swung away from her. "Don't make me like everyone else."

She laughed, because it was just what she'd said moments before. She walked away from him down the passage, making sure her hips swayed, just in case he could still see her in the lantern light.

*

GRANT WASN'T QUITE sure what had just happened. He knew he'd angered her by arranging her protection without her knowledge or permission, and he knew he'd hurt her somehow though he couldn't quite remember what he'd said. Her idea that he kissed her from some selfless motivation had angered him, that he'd lost control of the situation and of himself. Utterly churned up and ashamed, he was terrified of losing more ground than he'd ever gained with her.

As her back vanished into the darkness, panic swamped him, that whatever between them was over, that he'd killed it.

The trouble was, she dazzled him. He didn't really know her or properly understand her. Or she, him. He was different enough from her fashionable town flirts to intrigue her a little, but he had to face the fact that here at last was a situation, a person, that he couldn't win by his usual combination of skill, perception, and perseverance.

Love was new to him and seemed to have addled his wits. His few fleeting forays into something higher than simple lust had not prepared him for this overwhelming emotion, or the mindboggling stupidity that seemed to go with it. But the truth was, he would die to save her one moment of pain.

And he knew pain was all his brother Vernon would bring her.

None of that meant she would love him, Tristram Grant, curate and coxcomb of Blackhaven. Probably ex-curate by now.

From instinct, he started down the passage after her. He would not sulk like a child, or stop looking after her. He needed to learn the

humility he preached, and he acknowledged ruefully that she was just the woman to teach him.

By the time he reached the filtered sunshine of the cave, she was gone. Carefully, he peered out at the beach, which appeared to be empty until he emerged, and saw her walking along the edge of the waves, her shoes and stockings in her hands. She strode out with enthusiasm, perhaps assuaging her anger at him, perhaps just enjoying the sand between her toes.

He'd never felt so helpless in his life. And yet his heart warmed and ached, just at the sight of her.

He moved toward her, his heart full of things he wanted, needed to tell her. And then a burst of laughter interrupted his delusion, causing him to spin around. A couple of lads were running down the cliff path toward the beach. And he couldn't be seen. He couldn't rely on anyone else's good will to hide himself and Cornelius. It was intolerable. He couldn't run across the beach to her, let alone escort her home, protect her.

He backed away to the rocks, melted into the cave and began to think seriously about the best way forward for everyone.

*

KATE, HAVING COME to the conclusion that she had given the charming curate far too great a role in her life, decided to bend her mind to other matters. Particularly after he emerged from the cave and didn't come to her. Admittedly, she'd stalked away back toward the town, but he didn't follow or make any effort to stop her. Damn him. She was behaving like a petulant debutante with her first crush.

As she reached the road, the sight of a familiar, if panting, figure—one of the men who'd attacked her—brought her up short. She still had the pistol in her reticule, which she opened to be ready. But the man's eyes darted in fury, and sure enough there was another watcher, one of Grant's burly soldiers this time.

She hurried on into the busier part of town and back to the hotel. Here, she sent notes to the Smallwoods and to Gillie, inviting them to tea that afternoon. Then she spent a comfortable hour or two planning her dress for Mrs. Winslow's ball. Admittedly, her mind tended to dwell on the dazzling affect her appearance would have upon the curate, and how she would toe him aside when he prostrated himself at her feet. But at least that made her feel better.

She then donned a particularly charming tea dress of flimsiest white India muslin embroidered with entwined red flowers, and went downstairs.

To her annoyance, Lord Vernon was lurking in the dining room. He

sprang to his feet as soon as she walked in, although, fortunately, Kate caught sight of the Smallwoods and veered immediately toward them as though she hadn't seen him.

Mrs. Smallwood greeted her loudly, and only moments later mortified her daughter further by leaping to her feet and calling, "Yoo-hoo! Lady Wickenden!"

Gillie, just entering the room, took it all in stride, but then she had apparently met the Smallwoods before, though under what circumstances remained a mystery.

"Am I late?" Gillie asked breathlessly, as if she'd run all the way.

"No, in perfect time," Kate assured her. "We have ordered tea, scones, and cake. Is everything well?"

Gillie gave her a quick conspiratorial glance and nodded.

"I'm so glad you joined us, Lady Wickenden," Mrs. Smallwood gushed. "For in truth, I wished to ask a favor."

"Of course," Gillie said at once, although an uneasy look entered her eyes. "If it is in my power."

"I presume you are attending dear Mrs. Winslow's ball on Saturday?"

"Why, yes, we do plan to go. All of us, even my stepmother."

Mrs. Smallwood's face fell. "Then you will have a full carriage," she said in dismay.

"Mama," Miss Smallwood murmured in an agony of embarrassment.

"Well, if I don't ask, how will you attend?" her mother retorted. "The truth is, I was hoping to prevail upon you to chaperone Jenny for me. She so wishes to go and I cannot take her."

Mrs. Smallwood's eyes slewed around to Kate.

"I would not do, ma'am," Kate assured her. "I am not a suitable chaperone for your daughter. To be frank, her reputation will barely survive tea in my company."

"Kate!" Gillie admonished as the mother's eyes grew round with something very like terror. "Lady Crowmore is joking you. In any case, I will be happy to take Jenny if she wishes, for we'll need two carriages in any case."

Instantly, Mrs. Smallwood was wreathed in smiles. "I was so hoping you would say that! After all, you do owe us for stealing Wickenden away from Jenny."

Kate, who'd just lifted her teacup to her lips, almost choked. Hastily, she set her cup down again. "Well, that's a story I don't know," she murmured.

Gillie shifted in her seat. "It wasn't quite like that," she muttered.

"It was *nothing* like that," Jenny exclaimed. "Lord Wickenden was never anything but kind to me."

“Exactly,” Mrs. Smallwood said with triumph. “But we don’t grudge dear Lady Wickenden her husband, for several gentlemen, much wealthier gentlemen than Wickenden, have since distinguished Jenny by their attentions. I believe I will have her married and off my hands before she is seventeen.”

Startled, Kate glanced at Jenny, who looked both mortified and hunted.

“I was married at seventeen to a wealthy man,” Kate drawled. “We all regret it. The most fashionable people now are not marrying off their daughters until twenty.”

“Twenty!” Mrs. Smallwood peered at her, appalled. “I believe you’re joking me again.”

“Not really,” Kate said. “If she were my daughter, I’d let her shine and have fun for a few years before the brilliant wedding.”

“But then there wouldn’t *be* a brilliant wedding,” Mrs. Smallwood objected. “She’d be on the shelf.”

“Forgive me, Gillie, but how old were you when you married Wickenden?” Kate drawled. “Two and twenty? Three and twenty? I believe he is counted a brilliant match.”

“Of course he is!” Mrs. Smallwood declaimed triumphantly. “Which is why she stole him from my Jenny.”

“Mama,” Jenny whispered, as if in real agony now. “People will hear! Please stop!”

“Well, there, I bear no grudges,” Mrs. Smallwood said with blatant untruth. “For I have other gentlemen in my sights.”

Kate’s original motive in inviting the Smallwoods to tea had been to wean Bernard Muir’s affections off herself and onto someone more suitable, at least in age—namely Miss Smallwood. But as Mrs. Smallwood continued to chatter away about all her daughters’ suitors and their respective incomes, Kate felt increasingly strongly that Jenny should not simply be shipped off to the highest bidder before she was even old enough to recognize love. Or lack of it.

It was fellow-feeling, of course. At seventeen, Kate had been given to a much older man for political alliance and settlements, a man who should never have been allowed control over a dog, let alone a wife. At least her parents had known Crowmore, though they might have cared too little about his habits and vices. Mrs. Smallwood appeared to know nothing about these suitors apart from their income. She resolved to speak to the older lady in private, warning caution and even offering assistance.

However, just as she leaned forward under cover of Gillie’s conversation with Jenny, Lord Vernon materialized at their table, bowing with his usual supreme elegance.

“Lady Crowmore,” he said formally, to show, no doubt, that he

was on his best behavior. "May I join you?"

Kate was about to send him about his business in no uncertain terms, when a much better plan popped into her head. She could kill two birds with one stone and the risk was minimal.

"For five minutes," she allowed, flippantly. "Before we banish you from our sight once more. Lady Wickenden, are you acquainted with Lord Vernon?"

"Good lord, are you Wickenden's bride?" Vernon exclaimed, taking Gillie's hand. "All London is agog to meet you, I assure you!"

Mrs. Smallwood sniffed, attracting Vernon's attention.

"Mrs. and Miss Smallwood," Kate murmured. "Ladies, Viscount Vernon."

Mrs. Smallwood, who seemed to carry in her head the estates and incomes of the entire population of the country, regarded him with undisguised interest. Vernon's affairs were shambolic due to his penchant for wine, horses, and gaming, but as the Earl of Boulton's heir, he was due to inherit a considerable fortune along with the earldom.

"My lord, do sit here," she gushed. "There is plenty space between myself and my daughter. We were just discussing the Winslows' ball on Saturday. Does your lordship go?"

"I can't say I'm acquainted with any Winslows," Vernon excused.

"Mr. Winslow is the local squire," Kate explained. "And I believe the ball is a much-anticipated social event."

"Dear Lady Wickenden will be chaperoning my daughter."

"Well, if you're all going, I shall scrape an acquaintance somehow and beg an invitation," Vernon said firmly, his gaze on Kate.

"I may not go," Kate said perversely. "I haven't decided yet. But you should beg Miss Smallwood for a dance right away. If her card is not already full, it soon will be."

While Gillie glared at Kate, Vernon seemed to notice the young girl for the first time. Always one to appreciate beauty, he promptly begged for a dance. "Preferably a waltz, if they allow it here."

Mrs. Smallwood began to denounce the waltz as improper, which Kate thought rich considering the intimacy she seemed happy enough to sell her daughter into. Vernon defended the dance in his lazy, good-natured manner.

"What are you doing?" Gillie hissed at Kate behind her hand. "You cannot throw Jenny to that man!"

"I won't need to," Kate said cynically. "Her mother will do it. He won't seduce her, you know. He's not that big a cad. But I thought his admiration might make Bernard sit up and take notice."

Gillie leaned back in her chair and lowered her voice even further. "You're using him to make my brother jealous of Jenny's favor? I'm

not sure I want him pursuing her! She is very good-natured, of course, but she is a trifle ... fickle."

"Well, so is Bernard," Kate pointed out. "You're right, of course, they are too young, but at least they're both kind, decent people." She didn't say that Bernard could use the Smallwood money, being penniless on his own account. Or that marriage to Bernard would keep Jenny out of the clutches of wealthy lechers and other unsavory characters her mother seemed to have lined up for the post of husband to the Smallwood heiress. She could see Gillie already mulling it over in her mind, though she still looked doubtful.

"Don't worry," Kate said. "People rarely do what you plan for them! And I am a terrible matchmaker. I merely throw the opportunity out there."

"But you hope also to keep both my brother and Lord Vernon from bothering *you*," Gillie said shrewdly.

"Well I know you concur with at least one of those aims."

"There is no way I can answer that without appearing to insult you," Gillie observed at last.

"I shan't hold it against you," Kate drawled.

To her surprise, Gillie smiled at her. "Actually, I think you're trying to do good things and look out for people. And I suspect you're more likely to hold *that* observation against *me*."

Kate laughed. "Not if you keep it to yourself. I have a reputation to maintain."

Chapter Eleven

JEREMIAH TUGG HAD finally acknowledged that just watching the hotel and waiting for opportunity to kill Lady Crowmore was just not going to work, even with the fighting vicar out of the way. So, he'd been smart. He'd hung around the stables and asked questions, not of the lady's groom but of the native stable staff and others. He knew that she'd ordered her horse brought round to the hotel at six o'clock that morning—which was ridiculously early for most nobs, but he wasn't going to waste the opportunity when he finally had it.

High Street was quiet. Even the coffee house was closed. And when the groom walked the horses down the road, riding the big black one and leading the smaller white one, there was no sign of the hotel doorman or any other staff.

Tugg, lounging at the corner of the alley next to the hotel, lifted his hand and made a forward gesture. Immediately, his three colleagues, Snoddie, Barrow, and Leman slid past him and out into the high street.

Barrow, being least villainous in appearance, approached the groom head on, asking for directions. Suspecting nothing, the groom dismounted—and was immediately coshed on the back of the head by Snoddie. He fell like a stone, and Snoddie and Leman dragged the inert groom round into the alley.

While Tugg kept watch, and Barrow somewhat nervously held the restive horses, Snoddie and Leman wrestled the groom out of his coat. Tugg hastily donned it and emerged from the alley, picking up the groom's fallen hat as he went and clapped it on to his head.

Barrow grinned, handed him the horses' reins, and sped off down the alley to help keep the groom quiet—by killing him if absolutely necessary. Tugg wasn't a great believer in killing, not if he wasn't paid for it, and as it stood, only the lady's death was being bought.

And there she was. He could see her approaching the hotel door alone. A maid scrubbing the floor stood up to let her pass, and obligingly opened the door for her. Tugg could barely contain his smile.



KATE HAD DECIDED to ride early for two reasons. Through boredom,

she'd gone to bed early the night before. But more importantly, she'd thought thus to avoid any effort of Lord Vernon's to accompany her. She planned, in fact, to ride on the beach, as she'd privately let slip to Gillie before they parted yesterday evening, in the dubious hope that Gillie would pass it on to Grant. Her urge to see him, speak to him, just to be with him, was like an insistent pain. He was bad for her. They were bad for each other, and yet she craved his company like opium.

Peter was on time. She was glad to see him through the glass hotel doors, holding the horses still. She was vaguely surprised he didn't walk them up and down, for Gladiator was tossing his head arrogantly, constantly tugging at the groom's arm, and Snow was pawing the ground, shifting as though trying to stand on Peter's toes.

"Mind your feet, ma'am," the maid cleaning the floor said as she stood up and opened the door for her. "It gets slippery when it's wet."

"Thank you," Kate said and stepped up to the door.

"Kate!" called a familiar voice behind her as footsteps ran across the foyer. She closed her eyes in frustration. "Hold up there."

She opened her eyes and went out, pretending not to hear him. With luck, she could be mounted and away before it came to a confrontation. But a vehicle suddenly appeared in front of the hotel, stopping abruptly enough to make the carriage horses snort and whinny with displeasure. Startled, Kate's horses pulled back from the vehicle, dragging Peter with them. At the same time, a man leapt out of the coach and grabbed Peter.

Kate had just time to register that the man from the coach was Tristram Grant, before he rammed the groom's arm behind his back and all but threw him at the carriage, where he was received by none other than Lord Wickenden. Had they taken leave of their senses?

She started toward them, instinctively grabbing the reins of the horses. Peter, in a last-ditch attempt to avoid being dragged into the coach, grabbed on to either side of the door and threw back his head to shout. Only it wasn't Peter.

It was the bully who'd once threatened her with a dagger.

She stopped dead, staring. Grant leapt up into the coach behind the ruffian, shoving him inside. Just for an instant, the curate glanced back and met her shocked gaze. And then the horses leapt onward and he slammed the door.

"What the *devil*?" Vernon uttered beside her. "That wasn't ... he looked just like—"

"Your brother?" Kate said, frowning as Grant hung out of the door once more, yelling something at the alleyway to the side of the hotel. "It is." Drawing the horses with her, she hastened toward the alley.

A man lay prostrate on the ground to the left. Three more were

just vanishing around the corner at the far end.

"Peter!" She ran the rest of the way to her groom, releasing the horses who showed no signs of going anywhere without her.

As she knelt in the dirty alley beside him, Peter groaned and opened his eyes. "W-what happened?" he demanded, trying to throw himself into a sitting position, and then grabbing at his head with a cry of pain.

"Hush, be still. Thank God you are alive, but they must have hit you. There's blood on your head." She investigated it, scowling over the injury.

"I don't understand, my lady," Peter said.

"That makes two of us," Vernon said. "Why is my brother here?"

"He's the curate," Kate said, deftly removing Peter's clean necktie and dabbing his matted hair with it.

"My God, is he really?" Vernon sounded entertained, and then affronted as he repeated, "Really? Then why the devil is he abducting people off the street?"

It was ridiculous, insane, and dangerous, but suddenly she wanted to laugh, because her heart had never been so light. Her voice shook with it as she said, "I think he might be trying to solve my Dickie Crowmore problem."

*

GRANT WAS, IN fact, attempting to solve all the major problems he knew of. He'd nearly missed his chance, too, with Kate choosing to ride so early. He'd received word of that only just in time. Even now as the coach took off with their captive secured, it made his blood run cold to think how close this villain had come to Kate. The feeling drowned even his natural jealousy when he saw Vernon beside her once more.

"Well, we've got one of them," Wickenden observed. The pistol he held inches from the prisoner's chest was perfectly steady. "What do you want to do with him? Strangle him? Throw him off the cliff?"

Grant breathed deeply, calming himself. "Oh no. We'll take him to the barracks and introduce him to Major Doverton as the source of their information about the escaped prisoner. I should think just looking at him would be enough for Doverton to forget the charges against me. If it isn't, this fellow will just have to say he was paid by someone."

The bully grinned ferociously. "I was. Indirectly. But I'm not saying so to no major. Nor magistrate neither."

"Well, perhaps I will just beat him to a pulp," Grant said to Wickenden.

“Thant’s no talk for a vicar,” the ruffian said severely. “You’re too handy with them fists for a man of God. It’s my belief you ain’t one neither.”

“Then you’d be wrong. But I’d advise you to do as I suggest.”

“Why would I?” the man demanded aggressively.

“Because if you do, I might speak for you and urge the major to release you as—er—a mere ignorant tool. At this point, you have nothing to lose by telling the truth. Because you don’t—you really don’t—want me to get to other charges, like the attempted murder of a peeress of the realm. We have plenty of witnesses to that.”

The ruffian glared at him.

“What’s your name?” Grant asked, swaying with the carriage as it turned uphill toward the barracks. “Tugg, is it?”

The man’s eyes widened. “How did you know that?”

Because he’d had enquiries made at the tavern, which was the only possible place people like Tugg could possibly stay around here. Unless they were prepared to live rough.

“I have my methods,” Grant said grandly.

Wickenden’s lips twitched, though the pistol remained steady.

Tugg scratched his head. “So you’re saying you won’t accuse me of murder if I just admit to informing against you about the prisoner?”

“Informing against me falsely and maliciously,” Grant corrected.

“Because some stranger paid me,” Tugg expanded. “No doubt some other toff who don’t like you.”

“No doubt,” Grant said.

“And that would be it? You’d let me go?”

“Provided you clear off and never come near either Blackhaven or her ladyship again.”

Tugg scowled. “Can’t do that, gov’nor. I got a job to do. I can’t go back and tell him we couldn’t do it! She’s only a woman, and I’ve got my reputation to think of. Besides, he ain’t going to be pleased and he’s got a nasty look in his eye.”

“Then tell him you did it,” Grant suggested.

Tugg blinked. Even Wickenden was looking at him a trifle oddly.

“What?” Tugg scratched his head again.

Grant leaned forward, as though confiding. “Tell him—let’s call him Lord C for convenience...” The flicker in Tugg’s muddy eyes told him he was right in that assumption, but then he’d never really doubted it. “Tell Lord C you killed her, that she’s dead. He’ll pay you and everyone is happy.”

“Except me when he finds out she’s swanning around Blackhaven very much alive!”

“Except *him* when he finds out she’s alive,” Grant corrected wryly. “How is a so-called gentleman like Lord C going to find and punish a

man like you? Without involving the law and his own vile conspiracy. I'm sure you have ways of lying low. Besides, it wouldn't be for long. I have plans of my own for Lord C."

Tugg regarded him with continued disapproval. "I never met a vicar like you before. I reckon you'd do well in my line of work."

"What, assassinating helpless women for money?" Grant said contemptuously.

"She ain't helpless or she'd be dead already," Tugg retorted. "I just do what I'm paid to do. Got to earn a crust. Mind you, don't care for the killing work much—too risky—but if a cove pays enough..."

"Quite," Grant said repressively. "Then we're agreed?"

"That I talk to your major and then go back to my cove—Lord C to you—and tell him I killed the lady? Get my money under false pretenses?"

"You don't like the plan?" Grant said gently. "You'd rather go to prison for attempted murder? I expect you'd hang. You probably should."

"Didn't say that, did I?" Tugg scratched his head yet again. Wickenden inched further back from him. "All right. But you're not to pursue my lads neither."

"I won't if they didn't hurt the groom too badly."

"He'll be all right," Tugg said comfortably. "Bit of a sick headache I should think, but no harm done."

"Why didn't you just kill him?" Wickenden asked curiously.

"Wasn't paid to, was I? He was just in the way." Tugg glared at Grant. "Like you."

*

THEIR ARRIVAL AT the barracks caused quite a stir. The coach was escorted across the parade ground by several running soldiers, while another vanished into the building at the far end. Their coachman—a servant of the Muirs who had once been a sergeant with the 44th—exchanged greetings and insults with acquaintances as they went, so it was hardly a threatening arrival.

By the time the coach pulled up outside the building and Grant alighted, Major Doverton was striding out to meet them. Since most of the regiment was now on the Peninsula, the barracks currently housed only a couple of officers and a handful of men, most of whom were raw recruits in training. But it seemed they'd all come out to watch the surrender of the fugitive curate.

Major Doverton scowled. The young lieutenant who'd tried to arrest Grant walked out of another building toward them, his jaw dropping as he wrestled himself into his coat.

Grant, with his hand significantly on Tugg's grubby collar, offered a slight bow. "Major. I don't believe we've met. I'm Tristram Grant."

"I know who you are, sir," Doverton said, his gaze darting over Tugg and Wickenden, then back to Grant. "Though I'm not sure who should be apologizing or explaining to whom."

"I most definitely owe you an apology, sir," Grant admitted, including the approaching lieutenant in his humble gesture. "I should not have fled. Indeed, I regret not accompanying the lieutenant as I originally intended. I'm afraid I panicked somewhat when I saw *this* fellow lurking, watching my arrest."

"You were not arrested, sir," Doverton said hurriedly, flicking a glance at Tugg. "Harper must have explained himself poorly."

"As did I. I believe his information came from *this* miscreant—one Mr. Tugg from London. As he will tell you, the information was spitefully given. I have never in my life aided a French prisoner to escape, let alone hidden such a creature."

"On top of which," Wickenden interjected, "you should know that Mr. Grant was a captain of the Queen's Own."

"This is Lord Wickenden," Grant said hastily. "Who helped me track down and capture Mr. Tugg."

"Lieutenant Harper," Overton barked. "Are you hearing this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Always check the source of your information! Especially when it's against someone as upstanding as a clergyman!"

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said miserably. He turned to Grant, lifting his chin. "I was heavy handed and overzealous, sir. I apologize."

Grant, feeling a shade uncomfortable, said ruefully, "Perhaps, but the true fault was mine, sir. I suspected a conspiracy when I saw this fellow, and I bolted. I apologize for that. Now, perhaps we should go inside so you can see what this fellow has to say..."

*

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND," Vernon complained yet again.

He'd followed Kate, Peter, and Little into the hotel's small reception room, where once she'd bathed Grant's knuckles. Now, she cleaned and bandaged Peter's head while the hotel staff arranged the return of the horses to the stables.

"It's perfectly simple," Kate said. "Those men attacked Peter to get to me. Mr. Grant stopped them."

"But even if such a wild story is true, how could he *know*?" Vernon demanded with an air of triumph.

"Well, it isn't the first time he's saved me from those same men," Kate informed him.

Vernon didn't quite like that, but then he wasn't meant to. Scowling, he said, "Why is he sniffing around you? Why didn't you tell me you'd met him here?"

"For one thing, it's none of your business who I meet where. For another, he seems to value his privacy."

Vernon let out a crack of laughter. "No wonder. My father would crucify him if he caught up with him."

Kate glanced at him, holding the bandage in place around Peter's head. "You will respect that privacy, won't you?"

Perhaps he heard the genuine anxiety in her voice, for a speculative look came into his eyes. "That might depend."

Kate scowled and seized the pin from Little's fingers. She had to remember to be careful jabbing it into the bandage and not into Peter's head. "Don't you dare consider coercing me over this. It won't work. I don't want a husband, Vernon, and I don't want a lover. You might as well return to London."

"Not without you. You need a husband, Kate. I won't get in your way."

Idiotically, Kate felt both annoyed at the concept of a husband who wouldn't get in the way, and irritated by the false concept of "needing" a husband at all. "Go away, Vernon," she said wearily. "If you want to be useful, tell them to arrange a room here for Peter. He can't return to the stables in this state."

"Course I can, my lady," Peter said at once.

"No, you can't. You'll stay here, and what's more, I'll be sending for a physician."

Vernon at least did her bidding, and by the time she emerged with Peter, a young man waited to show them to Peter's room, conveniently close to her own. The young man, who had shiny shoes, seemed to make Little blush. Kate wondered, with mixed feelings, if she was about to lose her maid. She'd grown too used and too familiar with Little. She didn't want to go back to having some fussy stranger constantly about her.

With Peter settled on the bed, resting in the darkened chamber, Kate left and found Vernon still in the passage, frowning.

"It doesn't make sense. Isn't the curate the fellow everyone's talking about? The one who gave the soldiers the runaround when they tried to arrest him for hiding a French prisoner?"

Kate brushed past him. "You shouldn't listen to gossip."

"No, I shouldn't," he agreed. "Because although Tris is a pain in the neck, I can't imagine him aiding and abetting the enemy! He fought them, for God's sake."

"Good morning, Vernon," she said civilly, opening her own door.

"Wait, don't you want to ride?" Vernon reminded her.

"No, I've gone off the idea. I shall make morning calls instead."

"I'll come with you."

Kate shut the door on him, although the gesture was spoiled slightly by having to open it again almost immediately to let Little in. Her mind was all on Grant and what further trouble he might have got himself into trying to help her. Why did people never believe she could help herself?

In truth, she'd been afraid their quarrel in the secret passage had parted them for good. She certainly hadn't expected him to be rushing to her rescue from his own fugitive position. And so, she changed from her riding habit into the first morning dress Little suggested, and then had to pace the rooms until it was a reasonable time to call.

Even so, she was aware it was unconscionably early for fashionable households. Fortunately, the Muirs did not count themselves fashionable, and a young footman showed her at once into an upstairs sitting room where she found not only the ladies of the house and the baby, but Cornelius, who eased to his feet as she entered.

"Oh, Kate, have you news?" Gillie cried, rushing toward her. "Do you know what's happening?"

"I was hoping you did," Kate said in dismay, pausing only to greet Gillie's aunt and stepmother with civility before she allowed herself to be yanked down on the sofa by Gillie.

Gillie said, "I know only that David and Mr. Grant left here at the crack of dawn, taking Danny with them."

"Danny?" Kate asked, since Gillie seemed to accord some significance to his presence with them.

"My father's old sergeant. Among other things, he's most useful in a fight," Gillie said ruefully. "Which is what makes me wonder. Only, in this case, he was driving our travelling coach!"

"Well, that makes sense," Kate allowed. "I saw them briefly, outside the hotel, where I'm afraid they—er—snatched someone off the street. I believe they were trying to help me, only I'm very afraid they've got themselves into more trouble."

"Who was this man they snatched?" Cornelius demanded, apparently torn between amusement and outrage that they'd acted without him.

"Someone who threatened me," Kate said reluctantly. "I have a complicated life," she admitted when everyone stared at her. Even the baby, who surprised her by suddenly smiling at her. To her own astonishment, Kate smiled back. Then, pulling herself together, she coughed. "We must work out where on earth they've gone. Are you sure they haven't returned to the cellar?"

"Not when I came up ten minutes ago," Cornelius said. "We're pretending I'm a morning caller," he explained.

Regarding him properly for the first time, Kate registered that he was wearing a set of smart clothes that almost fitted him. "Well, you almost look the part. Wickenden's clothes, I apprehend."

Cornelius grinned. "They'd never believe this in the clubs. What a pity I'll never be able to tell."

"Ah. Talking of telling, you should know that your other brother, Lord Vernon, is here, and that he's seen Mr. Grant. I don't begin to understand your relationship to each other or your father, but I feel you should both be aware."

"Damn," Cornelius said with feeling. "Beg your pardon, ladies. Does he know I'm here, too?"

Kate shrugged. "Why should he?"

"If you told him," Cornelius said bluntly.

"I didn't tell him anything except 'go back to London'," Kate snapped. Catching Gillie's eye, she paused and admitted, "Though, come to think of it, I might have encouraged him to beg, borrow, or steel an invitation to the Winslows' ball on Saturday. Maybe Bernard can shoot him before then."

Cornelius gave a bark of laughter. "Anyone would think you and Vernon were married. What does he think about you and Tris?"

Kate stood abruptly. "Don't be ridiculous. There is no *me and Tris*. And if there were, it would be neither his business nor yours. Gillie, I'm going to the pump room, which is always a hot bed of gossip—" She broke off, for Gillie had turned to her, one finger on her lips in a gesture of silence.

And sure enough, muffled voices and even laughter drifted from below. An instant later, there came quick, steady footsteps, more than one pair, and Wickenden's voice. Gillie jumped to her feet, the door opened, and Wickenden and Grant walked in.

Gillie ran to her husband with uninhibited joy and he caught her to him with the same natural affection. It cost Kate an unexpected pang, not for her lost love with David, but for the unlikelihood of her ever knowing any relationship so honest and intense.

I kiss you to make you love me. But I can't, can I? Grant's words in the tunnel came back to her without warning. It had seemed an odd admission of surrender from the man who never gave up. She wondered suddenly if he'd seen Vernon before that, if he knew her old lover was here.

Have I made him jealous? The possibility awed her for a moment before simple curiosity took over.

"Where have you been?" Gillie demanded, beating Wickenden's chest with her little fist. "Why did you abduct that man? And why is Mr. Grant now wandering about as though he's free?"

"He is free," Wickenden replied, detaching his lapel from her

clutching fingers, although it was noticeable he kept one arm around her.

"Am I?" Cornelius asked hopefully.

"You," said Grant, "will be taken by coach to the estate at Filby, where you can properly recover and then go where you will. I'm only free because I denied any knowledge of a French prisoner—"

"Technically true," Cornelius pointed out.

"So, if you're discovered here," Grant pursued. "We're both done for, and so is Keith, who vouched for me."

"Is he well enough to travel?" Kate asked doubtfully.

It was Cornelius himself who answered with a sigh. "Yes, I am. Filby isn't so far from here, and my father hates the place so he's not likely to come anywhere near. So, this fellow you abducted, is he under lock and key? Did you do some kind of exchange with the military?"

"No, I pled for him and sent him back to London," Grant said casually. He'd barely looked at Kate, and her warm pleasure in his care for her was slowly freezing.

"Why?" she asked, as everyone looked at her askance.

Slowly, Grant swung his gaze around to her face. "So that he'll tell Dickie Crowmore he killed you."

Her breath caught at the ugly word.

"Mr. Grant!" Gillie protested, clearly distressed.

"Bit sick, little brother," Cornelius said sternly.

But Kate understood at once. "He'll betray himself. Why on earth should he imagine I'm dead when I'm clearly shocking the natives in Blackhaven?"

Grant's lips quirked. He inclined his head.

"Clever," she allowed. "Gets rid of them, baits Dickie, and sets you free, all in one blow. *If* he tells Dickie. Do you think he will?"

Grant shrugged. "I believe so. He has every reason to. How is your groom?"

"He has a sore head. I've asked Dr. Lampton to call on him, just to be safe, but I think he'll recover." She rose to her feet, uncomfortable with having all this discussed in public, which was ridiculous considering the nature of the gossip she knew was discussed about her all the time. "It only remains for me to thank you both," she said lightly, with a bow, "and to be on my way. Good morning, ladies. Gentlemen."

"I'll walk down with you," Grant said. "I have a hundred and one things to do at the church."

Cornelius made a derisory noise before adding, "Yes, and you'd better watch out, especially in Lady Crowmore's company, when Vernon's in town."

"I know," Grant said. She could imagine his carelessness was studied. Certainly, he didn't even glance at her as he spoke. So, he *had* known before but said nothing. Why would he say nothing? Through delicacy? Suspicion? And she wasn't going to marry him anyway, so why did it matter?

Because he wanted to court her and, God help her, she liked that idea. Without the marriage at the end of it, of course.

"Well," Kate said as they left the house after making civil farewells to the Muirs and Wickendens, "We may both finally walk without fear in Blackhaven. Except fear of gossip, of course."

He cast her a glance of sardonic amusement. "I never heard that Lady Crowmore feared gossips."

"I meant you, sir," Kate replied, and he laughed. She liked his laugh, ready and infectious, the kind that came from genuine entertainment rather than politeness or affectation. And the way it lit his face sparked butterflies in her stomach. She drew in her breath. "I owe you an apology, Mr. Grant."

"You do?"

"I was ill-tempered yesterday and quite unreasonable. I am not used to being one of a crowd and I didn't like to think of myself as just one of the people you help. And yet, that you help everyone in need is one of the things I like most about you."

It wasn't easy to say, but at least she'd surprised him. His gaze lingered on her face. "You do apologies very well," he acknowledged. "But in this case at least, there is no need. No offence was taken. In fact, I thought it was my interference which irritated you."

"Perhaps it did. I can be quite bad tempered."

His lips quirked. "And sweet-natured."

Warmth rushed upon her, at the same time as sadness. She looked away. "I'm not. I wish you didn't have these illusions about me." Now was her moment to tell him about Vernon, to explain that nothing had ever happened between them beyond a flirtation that she had no desire to repeat. That she didn't want him here, that he meant nothing to her.

But how could you say that to a man about his brother? Especially when you didn't even know why you wanted to say it. There could never be anything between her and Grant, because she would never marry him, and he would accept nothing less. It brought a certain exquisite torture to walking beside him.

"I like your illusions," she confessed at last. "But they are only illusions."

Whatever he would have replied to that was lost in the exclamations of three ladies approaching from the direction of the market, all declaring their joy in seeing him and begging him to dispel

the ridiculous rumors of his arrest.

"I can imagine the rumors," Grant said smoothly, "but the whole thing was born of misunderstandings, since put to rest by Major Doverton and myself."

"Then you will still christen Edward on Sunday?"

"Of course."

Kate had eased herself out of their circle and meant to melt away in a somewhat uncharacteristic manner. But Grant merely tipped his hat to the ladies and moved on with her.

"You don't need to escort me, you know. I am now perfectly safe," she pointed out.

"I know. But, selfishly, I like your company."

"Your congregation will talk."

"Let them."

She lifted her eyebrows. "You'll be doing your father's work for him and losing your place here."

"I don't believe that." He raised his hat to people across the street and murmured greetings to a family of lower social standing who passed him wreathed in smiles. "I really do have work I need to catch up on for the rest of the day, but perhaps you might consider lending me your horse and riding with me again tomorrow morning?"

"That would be most obliging," she said calmly, although her heart beat like a debutante's accepting her first dance. "Gladiator needs the exercise, and I have no intention of letting Peter ride as soon as tomorrow."

Grant smiled. "I always said you were a good woman."

"No, I'm not," she said at once. "Peter is an excellent groom and I have no desire to lose him."

Chapter Twelve

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Kate met Grant at the stables and rode with him up to the abbey, where once she'd won a ladies' watercolor competition and swapped paintings with Gillie Muir.

"Do you still have it?" Grant asked, as they rested the horses amongst the ruins. He strolled beside her, trailing his hand along the old stone walls and fallen boulders, as though he could thus absorb their history.

"Actually, I do. Though I doubt Gillie kept mine."

"Because her husband was the man you loved when you were a young girl?"

She smiled without looking at him. "How did you guess? Did he tell you?"

"No. But you're different with him. And he cares about you."

"You don't ask if I love him still," she observed.

"I don't need to. I know you don't, not as Gillie does."

She bent her head to a wild rose growing through a ruined arch and inhaled the perfume. "You can't possibly know that."

"Some things about you, I do know, without you having to tell me."

"Some things you *guess*," she corrected.

"No," he insisted. "Come, don't *you* know *me* better than you should on such short acquaintance?"

She stole a quick glance at him. "Perhaps."

"There is a bond between us. I don't truly understand how or why, but I felt it as soon as we spoke."

Although secret pleasure seeped through her, she said outrageously, "That was mere lust, Mr. Grant. But being a clergyman, you have to justify it with something finer."

"No, I don't," he disputed. "I am as subject to lusts of the flesh as the next man."

"Then you don't lust for me?" she mocked. "I am disappointed not to say offended."

"You know I do. Don't make me show you."

"Perhaps I want you to show me."

He smiled, turning to face her. They stood very close together. "Will you marry me, Kate?"

"You know I won't."

“Because of Vernon?”

She kept his gaze with difficulty, because this was the first time he'd mentioned his brother in this way. “No. I won't marry anyone.”

She waited for him to ask if Vernon was still her lover. She wanted to tell him he was not, but at the same time, it would infuriate her if he had to ask. He claimed to know her, so of all things, he should know this.

He didn't ask, but instead, cupped her cheek and bent his head. Anticipation spun through her stomach. She lifted her face to his, parting her lips. Grant didn't move, just stared at her mouth. His breath caught, and she knew the moment had passed.

Kate stepped back, but he followed, claiming her mouth with sudden, yet tender passion. She clung to his wrist as he caressed her cheek, opening to him. His kisses were a revelation, and she was becoming dangerously addicted. When she pressed nearer, he took her properly into his arms, kissing her eyelids and cheeks, and the lobes of her ears before returning to her mouth.

It was sweet and heady, and when his hand slid around to cup her breast, she gave a little moan of sheer pleasure, her mouth opening wider in total surrender. He took it, plundering her mouth and her curves until she trembled.

And then he tore his mouth free, and kissed her neck as though inhaling the scent of her skin.

“For God's sake, marry me before I explode,” he said shakily.

Laughter trembled on her tingling lips. “I won't marry again. I won't be owned.”

He raised his head, his eyes thrillingly dark and clouded. “I could own you now if I choose to. Deny it.”

“I do deny it. You would take only what *I* choose to give.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “Kate, that would always be the case.”

“You haven't been married,” she pointed out. Reaching up, she pressed a quick, hard kiss on his lips and slipped out of his arms.

*

EARLY THE NEXT day, Cornelius said goodbye to Tris and the Muirs, then stepped into Lord Wickenden's travelling coach to be driven quietly out of Blackhaven for his father's estate at Filby. Tris was right. He should rest up for a week and then go to London and face the old man. Get it over with.

With frequent changes of horses, he could probably have made it to Filby by nightfall, but since he wished to avoid the major posting houses, he took the journey by easier stages, finding a snug little inn

in which to spend the night. It was such an out-of-the-way, unpretentious little house, that he did not anticipate meeting anyone who might have heard of him let alone met him.

Until he walked into the taproom for a glass of ale and saw Dickie Crowmore sitting at the corner table busily writing, a mug at his elbow.

Cornelius stepped back out of the room, unseen.

It had been a year since Cornelius had seen Dickie, but he was sure it was him, narrow chest and shoulders above the table, and too-thin legs sticking out underneath. His nose was long and pinched, his eyes narrow, and his mouth downturned and mean. And yet, somehow, he was not an ill-looking fellow. Or an ineffectual one. Just not a very congenial one.

Dickie was ten or so years older than Cornelius, so although they'd moved in the same milieu, they'd never been friends. Cornelius had never cared for him, in fact. There had been an odd sense of entitlement about him that grated. Not entitlement to the fine things money can buy—their entire class shared that view—but a sense that he could say and do whatever the hell he liked to anyone. A bit, in fact, like old Lord Crowmore, whose heir he was.

The world said Dickie had been hopping mad with fury when old Crowmore had married again. Society had, in fact, waited with glee for the new young Lady Crowmore to produce an heir and put Dickie's nose out of joint once and for all. Now, with the old man dead, Dickie finally inherited, and from what Tris had let fall, he was being entirely ruthless about ensuring that no late babies, of the old baron's blood or otherwise, should threaten that inheritance.

All this, Cornelius remembered in a flash as he effaced himself.

"Changed my mind," he told the innkeeper as he came across him in the passage. "I'd rather be quiet. Could you bring some ale and some supper to my chamber instead?"

"Of course," beamed the landlord, who must have been delighted to have two members of the quality staying with him at one time. Cornelius was glad he'd been discreet enough to use his Christian name as a surname, just in case the innkeeper was prone to gossip.

As he made his way to his bedchamber, he speculated hard on what the devil Dickie Crowmore was doing here. Tris had been sure he was in London, sending bullies to do his dirty work for him. Tris had turned the tables, sending the ruffian back to claim his fee with a lie that Lady Crowmore was dead.

Had Dickie missed the would-be assassin's news? Or had he come up here to be closer when the news *did* come?

So, did he think poor Kate was dead or not?

Presently, the innkeeper's wife brought him up a tray of fresh

soup, beef, and vegetables with some sweet-smelling bread and ale. Unlike her husband, she seemed disposed to chatter, so Cornelius kept her engaged in conversation until she let fall a few remarks about her other noble guest, a lord no less.

"Lord Who?" Cornelius asked, as if he didn't know.

"Crowmore," the landlady said proudly.

"A very fine gentleman, I'm sure. What brings him to this part of the world?"

"I believe he's going to Blackhaven to take the waters there."

Cornelius feigned a tut of sympathy. "Ah. He does not keep well."

"And just sustained a shock, apparently. Already grief-stricken for his poor uncle who died just a month or so ago, now his aunt, the late gentleman's wife, has upped and died! And her only a beautiful young thing of just eight and twenty."

"Tragic," Cornelius agreed with growing excitement. So at least Dickie had heard Tris's message. But he wasn't meant to go himself to Blackhaven. He was meant to talk all over *London* about Kate's death and thus betray himself before Kate returned. Besides which, the man was evil and shouldn't be allowed near Kate. Maybe he should write to Tris, or Vernon.

Burying his face in his ale mug, he considered gloomily the idiocy of brothers who pursued the same woman. Mind you, he could see the attraction. He would almost certainly have had a go himself if Vernon—and Tris—hadn't been in there first. He meant to be hundreds of miles away from that fight before it happened.

He'd write to Tris first thing tomorrow morning, before he left the inn.

However, he woke when it was barely daylight, to the sound of carriage wheels rumbling across the inn yard, and when he bolted painfully to the window, clutching his wounded shoulder, he saw a departing coach lumbering toward the gate. It bore the Crowmore crest.

And at the road end, it turned north toward the Blackhaven road.

"Oh damnation," Cornelius said, tugging painfully at his hair in an effort to think. A note just wouldn't do, would it? What if the weasel got there first, hid, and pushed Kate out of a window or something?

Opening his own window, he yelled across the yard for Wickenden's coachman. When the man appeared, bleary-eyed from sleep, Cornelius called, "Change of plan! We're returning to Blackhaven."

*

KATE KNEW HE was there from the moment he emerged from the trees

behind her. It was as if the very air changed, thickening with excitement as it blew between them, causing her spine to tingle and her stomach to tighten. All the little hairs at the back of her neck stood up. But it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. In fact, the anticipation was oddly thrilling.

Not that she betrayed that for an instant. Seated on a stool before her easel, she carried on painting, glancing from her work to the vista before her, the hills sweeping down to the shore and the calm, gray-blue sea making its stately, inexorable way closer to the shore. She loved the uneven shapes of the craggy rocks contrasting with the even, square castle at the corner of her picture, and the tidy little town spilling down to the harbor.

She was rather pleased with the way she'd caught the colors and the light on the sea, and her perspective was pretty good. She wondered if she should attempt to paint in Little and her young man, whose name was Edwin Gage, who sat on the blanket in front of her, pretending to pack up the food. But in fact, she'd no real idea where to put her brush next, for she couldn't think with Grant behind her.

At last, Little dragged her gaze from Edwin and noticed the curate. She bobbed her head in greeting, and Kate laid down her brush in relief. She could finally admit to noticing his presence.

"Are you examining my work, Mr. Grant?" she drawled without turning.

"No," he murmured. He stood so close his breath stirred her hair. "At the moment, I'm too fascinated by the delicacy of your nape and the line of your shoulders."

She couldn't help the heat that surged through her body. Perhaps he would imagine it was the warmth of the sun. To be on the safe side, she still didn't turn.

"There is no need for flattery, sir," she said tartly. "I am immune. In fact, I dislike it excessively."

"I would never dream of flattering you," he returned, bending as if to gaze at the picture. "You smell of orange blossom and the sea, and I ache to kiss you just *there*." His fingertips touched the base of her nape and flew along to the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Before she could prevent it, her lips parted in a small gasp of shock and pleasure, which she tried to cover by turning to face him at last.

She should probably have eased her shawl farther up, too, but she didn't wish to discourage him from following his desires.

"You may not kiss me anywhere at all," she said lightly, although her gaze showed a distressing tendency to cling to his half-smiling lips. She forced it upward to his eyes, and God help her, that was no better, for they were thrillingly warm, with that strange clouded gleam that came only with desire. "I am playing chaperone to my

maid and Mr. Gage.”

“He works in the hotel,” Grant observed, straightening, to both her relief and disappointment. “Are you fostering Miss Little’s romance?”

“Of course not,” Kate said crossly. “The wretched girl would leave me if she married him. I merely borrowed him to carry all my things up here.”

“Of course you did,” Grant soothed, grinning. “You see, this is one of the reasons I like you so much. No other lady of my acquaintance would even notice her maid’s flirtations, let alone promote them. In most cases, it would be grounds for dismissal.”

“Well, I won’t need to dismiss her or write her a reference if she marries Mr. Gage,” Kate retorted.

“Do you think she will?”

“No. She has only known him a week, and we shall be leaving soon.”

He came around in front of her, frowning. “You shall? When?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know yet. But no one stays in Blackhaven forever, do they? Except curates, perhaps.”

“Ouch.” He held her defiant gaze. “Walk with me.”

“I’m busy,” she protested, lifting her brush once more.

“Then send *them* away.”

She opened her mouth to blister him, as she did anyone who tried to command her or her servants. But, of course, he hadn’t commanded. His tone had merely suggested, though perhaps with a hint of urgency. The trouble was, she didn’t feel in control of this relationship at all, and that was dangerous. It made her want to lash out and hurt him. Even when he didn’t deserve it.

She threw her brush down, splattering water and paint over her picture. “Little, go for a walk while I quarrel with Mr. Grant. Mr. Gage, look after her, if you please.”

Edwin sprang up with alacrity, holding out his hand to help Little to her feet. The pair scampered off toward the woods, although Little kept glancing anxiously back over her shoulder.

“He will have to polish his shoes again when he returns to the hotel,” Kate observed. “Do you think they will enjoy a passionate tryst in the woods?”

“I don’t believe I care.”

“You could marry them forcefully for their sins.”

He dropped on to the blanket beside the basket and stretched out his long legs. “I don’t want to marry anyone forcefully. Even you. Especially not you.”

“Good, for you must acknowledge now that I would make a positively dreadful clergyman’s wife. Beside my scandalous reputation, I am ill-natured and addicted to hedonistic pleasures. I would be the

talk of Blackhaven, and make you so by association. I would ruin your career and your life."

It was a fairly comprehensive self-denunciation, and had the added merit of being quite true. But it didn't have the effect she intended.

His eyes gleamed with more amusement than anything else. "Do you love me?"

"Of course I don't. I've known you little more than a week! Besides, what has love to do with marriage?"

"For me, everything. For you... Don't you think marriage would be much more fun if you loved your husband?"

"No," she said baldly. "I am going to be a disreputable and happy widow."

"Disreputable in what way? Will you take lovers?"

"Of course," she said airily. "I've already offered you the position."

Quick laughter shook him. He reached out his hand. "You are outrageous. Come and sit with me."

Reluctantly, and yet with a drumming heart, she rose and walked the few paces to the blanket and lowered herself to a kneeling position facing him.

"Why would you take a lover, Kate? Pleasure? Companionship?"

"Why else?" she said carelessly.

He leaned forward and took her hand from her lap, where it had been twisting the fine muslin of her gown. "I would give you those things in marriage," he promised. "What is the difference?"

She gazed at her hand in his, watched the caressing motion of his thumb on her skin, and allowed herself to feel every sensation. She ached.

"Power," she said. "Legal power. Eternity."

"Do you think a man changes into a monster when he signs the marriage contract? Did Crowmore?"

"No, he was always a monster. I just chose not to see it. Perhaps I even imagined I could tame the monster. It's not a mistake I will repeat."

"Kate," he said softly. "Am I a monster?"

She looked away, trying to draw her hand free as she shook her head. "I don't know you. Any more than you know me. You would not imagine you loved me if you knew me."

"I know enough. I know you hide your care and kindness and exert it in secret. I know that you are witty and clever and interested in everything and everyone. That you're fun, sweet, and passionate. And skilled in watercolors. That there is so much more I've yet to find. I look forward to uncovering you layer after layer for the rest of our lives."

She raised her eyes back to his in wonder.

He kissed the inside of her wrist. "I cannot hope to be so interesting, so fascinating to you, but I believe we have a beginning. I want you, yearn for you, in my life, my home, my bed. But I'll be patient. I'll wait for you, whether you give me leave to or not. I am faithful by nature."

She tried to smile. "Like a dog?"

"Exactly like a dog. Though I clean myself with more decorum and my mating rituals are much more civilized."

Laughter broke from her lips before she could prevent it. With her free hand, she grasped his lapel. "I like you, Tristram. I like you too much, but you tie me in knots. I can't think around you. I need to go away and let us both be happy."

It came to her that he might imagine she meant she intended to go away with Vernon, who still lurked in Blackhaven—although he'd given up keeping track of her. But she wouldn't unsay it or explain it. It would be best.

"I would not be happy if you went away," he said softly. "Would you?"

She stared at him. Honesty compelled her to shake her head. He bent and kissed her, long and tenderly. Despite all her good intentions, she melted into him and let the joy enfold her, consume her. Nowhere but in his arms did she feel this sense of peace and safety ... and yet, she was very far from safe. The latent passion between them, the rushing flames of lust, were not peaceful at all. Like the man himself, this relationship was full of massive, exciting contradictions.

And then, quite suddenly, the knowledge seemed to flow from his lips, over hers and up into her brain, finally making the connection that had always been there. *I love him.*

Her mouth opened wide in a gasp of terror and joy. Stunned, unable to understand what it could possibly mean, let alone what she should do about it, she hung in his arms, absorbing his kisses and caresses, returning them with trembling lips and hands.

I love him.

Somehow, she lay across his lap, her arms tight around him. Just for now she didn't care what this love meant or what she should do about it. Its very existence was enough to overwhelm her with wonder and a gladness so fierce that tears sprang from her eyes, trickling down her cheeks and into their mouths.

"Kate," he whispered in distress, wiping her damp face with his fingers. "What is it?"

"I don't know, I can't... Nothing." She took back his mouth because that way she didn't need to speak, just feel. But she knew, somewhere, that nothing would ever be the same again.

He could have taken her there in the open and she would have welcomed him with gladness. It was certainly where those heated kisses and increasingly intimate caresses were leading. And in truth, the prospect of physical love had never excited her before. This with Tristram...

"Someone is coming," he whispered in her ear. "Will I save your reputation or marry you?"

She could barely summon the strength to push him off and slip off his lap onto the blanket. "A low blow, especially for a clergyman," she said shakily, feeling for her bonnet and clapping it back on her head.

"A man in my position has to try anything." He eased a little back from her, giving her a swift smile that caught at her breath all over again. "In truth, I was coxcomb enough to imagine I had really won you this time."

God help me, you won me a week ago when we met. What am I to do, now?

"It's your maid," Grant said with frustration. "Doesn't she understand when you tell her to go for a walk?"

"She worries about me," Kate said truthfully. "Though for some reason, she seems to like you. Well, I suppose it's time I went back. I have the Winslows' ball to dress for."

"I believe there is to be waltzing. Will you waltz with me?"

"If no one more entertaining comes along," she drawled.

"I shall be very, *very* entertaining."

For some reason, his words heated her cooling body all over again. She all but jumped to her feet, instructing Gage and Little to fold the blanket and the easel. It was time to go.

Chapter Thirteen

GRANT WAS TAKEN by surprise. He'd felt the upsurge of emotion in her as if it were his own. She'd wept. Either he'd hurt her in some way he couldn't fathom, or he'd touched her. And he'd been so sure it was the latter, until she suddenly leapt back from him, and in their walk back to town, she grew increasingly distant. She seemed uninterested in anything he said, replying with only brief, sardonic phrases or monosyllables.

He didn't know whether he should be anxious for her wellbeing or terrified she'd tired of him. In fact, he felt consumed by both.

In his life, Grant had rarely doubted that he could achieve what he wanted. He'd got his cavalry commission and shone, until he'd realized it was no longer what he wanted. He'd studied for the Church and succeeded under his own auspices, and defied his father to do so. So far as women were concerned, he'd gone after those few who'd caught his eye, and won them. But they had all been passing fancies, and it had always been he who'd drawn back, who'd ended the courtship or liaison, or whatever relationship he'd formed, by turning it adroitly into friendship if he could.

This feeling for Kate had been different from the outset. Intense, all-consuming, and powerful. Perhaps it should have frightened him, living as they did in different worlds. And then there was the matter of birth. She was the daughter of a baronet, the widow of a baron, a leader of fashionable society, at least until this scandal. He was an earl's bastard, a curate living on a tiny salary and the remnants of his wartime prize money. No one but he could ever have seen any possibilities in this relationship.

And yet he did. Perhaps because he'd been brought up a gentleman, spending much of his boyhood in his father's homes. But more likely because he was simply drawn to her. She fascinated him, dazzled him, set his blood on fire. But more than that, he thought he understood her. He saw beneath her shell to the lonely, vulnerable woman, and to the kind, clever, strong, fun-loving creature, too. It was true he'd fallen hard and instantly, but he fell deeper with every encounter, and he loved all those aspects of his Kate, and all those he'd yet to discover.

Most of all, he was sure he'd make her happy as no one else could.

Now, he considered the possibility of not just failing to win her as

his wife, but of losing her altogether. He'd amused her for a little because he was different, but the fact that he loved her couldn't make her love him. He, who saw life and its challenges and problems so clearly, had no idea what to do about this one.

"Good bye, Mr. Grant," she said carelessly.

They'd walked at a brisk pace and were just approaching the outskirts of town, where a narrower road forked away from the coast, leading directly to the church and the vicarage. The main road led to High Street and the hotel. He'd had every intention of escorting her there, but her farewell left him in no doubt that he wasn't wanted.

He could follow her like an abject dog. Or he could trot away like an obedient dog. Although he didn't much care for either option, he chose the less undignified, bowed to her already vanishing back, and murmured his farewell.

Grant rarely panicked, but he had to suppress the upsurge of it now. He couldn't lose her, not now when he appeared to be winning.

Winning! Dear God, this is not a game or a battle! I want to make her happy, care for her, love her.

And if making her happy meant walking away? Could he really do that?

He shook himself almost angrily as he strode along the road toward the church. A moment of irritation, of desire to be alone, meant nothing. She hadn't forbidden him her presence. And he would see her tonight at the ball.

But she talked of leaving Blackhaven, a cold voice in his head reminded him.

What if she was departing with Vernon, and regretted leaving Grant just a little?

He squeezed his eyes shut, then had to open them in a hurry to greet Mrs. Nielson and her dog.

He could not believe that of her. Everything about her had told him that Vernon had lost her weeks ago, that he, Grant, was winning her...

Winning. That word again. He could not lower her or his love to a mere contest.

He pushed open the church door and went inside, relieved to discover it was empty.

In recent years, Grant had found peace and new purpose in God and the Church, as well as in the practicalities of helping his neighbors and his flock. He'd never felt it as a crutch before, though, and his need of it now took him by surprise.

He supposed he needed greater humility.

Fortunately, there were physical things to do. The pew on the front left had become distinctly wobbly. If he left it much longer, the

Winslows would find themselves sitting on the cold floor one Sunday.

Instead of sending for Jem, the carpenter, he walked through to the vestry, shrugged out of his coat, and found a hammer and some nails at the bottom of the cabinet. Then he bent his mind to the problem of the damaged pew, discovered what needed doing, and lay down on the church floor to hammer in missing nails and reinforce a piece of cracked wood.

Whether it was the physical work or the concentration of his mind, he felt better as he hauled himself out from under the pew—and from his upside-down position, saw a man sprawled on the end of the front right pew, one foot up on the gate.

“Damn me,” the person remarked. “It really *is* you.”

Grant sat up so quickly that he bumped his head against the bench. “Gilbert?”

Gilbert, his eldest half-brother, known to the world as Viscount Vernon, was a handsome devil with flashing, laughing eyes. At this moment, they weren’t so much laughing as sneering. Vernon could do a pretty good sneer on occasions.

“Well,” Vernon observed. “This is a bit of a come-down, is it not? From commanding the king’s armies, to repairing old pews in some out-of-the-way church no one has ever heard of.”

“Contrary to popular belief,” Grant observed, pulling himself to his feet, “I never did command quite all of the king’s armies. What do you want, Gilbert?”

Vernon shrugged. “Nothing. I just heard you were here, thought I’d drop in and see if it was true.”

“You’ve known I was here since Wednesday,” Grant pointed out. “Did it take you three days to decide whether or not you wanted to see me?”

Vernon’s eyes narrowed. “It seems you’ve known of my presence at least as long. Are you still deciding?”

“Oh no. It was made quite plain I was to have nothing to do with any of you.”

“And you always pay so much attention to what our father says!” Vernon mocked.

Grant lifted his eyebrows. “That was what *you* said.”

“Did I?” Vernon dropped his foot to the floor and sat just a little straighter. “Expect I was angry and trying to talk you out of this stupid idea. Don’t you wish you were back on the battlefield?”

“No.”

“Wellington’s on the rampage. You’re missing the final victory.”

“Victory is never final,” Grant said sardonically. “At best, it brings a lull in war.”

“Whatever you say, Curate. Who told you I was here? Kate

Crowmore?" He spoke the name like a challenge.

Grant refused to rise to it. "No," he said. "I saw you." He walked out to the vestry to find his coat, feeling his brother's eyes on the back of his head as he went.

"Please tell me Cornelius isn't here, too."

"Cornelius isn't here," Grant said obligingly, returning while he shrugged into his coat.

"I hear you helped Kate with Dickie Crowmore," Vernon said. "Thank you."

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Yes, you damn well do!" Vernon exclaimed.

Grant scowled at him. "Whatever I did or didn't do, it isn't your place to thank me."

"Actually, it is. I'm going to marry Kate."

It cost him a pang, but still he looked his brother in the eyes. "No, you're not. She'll never marry you."

Vernon's sneer returned with a vengeance. "Because she'll marry a *curate*?"

"No," Grant said. "Because, maritally speaking, she'll never swap one bastard for another."

Vernon flushed, sitting up straight. "I'll have you know I always treated Kate well!"

"Bollocks," Grant said rudely, reverting to childhood. "You took advantage of her, tricked her somehow into your house, and when all hell broke loose over her head, you scarpered without a word and left her to face it alone. Not a word or a note, let alone the public continuation of old friendship that was the only thing that could have helped her. Instead, you proved you were ashamed of her and in effect threw her to the wolves."

Vernon glowered, but licked his lips with a hint of nervousness. "Did she tell you that?"

"No," Grant said contemptuously. "She didn't need to. But I see that it really is true."

Vernon sprang to his feet. "Damn it, I didn't know what was the best thing! I had fellows grinning at me and Father on my back. What was a fellow to do? I lay low. Kate doesn't care about that."

"No, she expected it. And you can't see she deserves more."

Vernon's eyes narrowed again. "Who, the curate? You can't be serious. Or are you just using your new position to lecture me on morality?"

"Perhaps I would if I thought you'd listen."

"Oh, push off, Tris! I've already spoken to her father and we've agreed the best thing is for us to marry as soon as possible."

Grant curled his lip. "To pay your debts?"

"No. I've always liked Kate. Obviously." Vernon shrugged. "Though I won't deny her money will help, especially if she spawns and we get Crowmore's estates, such as they are. Father is damned tight-fisted, even with me. But it works both ways. I'll inherit eventually, and then she'll be a countess."

"Which will make her life complete," Grant said with such heavy sarcasm that even Vernon noticed.

"I shouldn't have bothered coming here," he said resentfully. "I should have known how you'd be. Bloody little—curate!" And he turned his back and stalked down the aisle.

"Gil." Grant didn't want to ask. He already knew it didn't matter, but still something wrung the words from him. "How were you planning to talk *our* father into this match?"

Vernon paused at the church door and looked back over his shoulder. "I don't know what you mean," he said loftily.

"Yes, you do. You know how he feels about any scandal attaching to his name."

"Well, you're walking proof he's no angel himself," Vernon retorted.

"I don't bear his name, and never would. I may have been looked after, but I was never publicly acknowledged. To him, indiscretion is the cardinal sin. Do you really expect him to bless Kate's entry into his family?"

Vernon reached for the door. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he muttered.

Grant laughed. "I thought so. You'd do it in secret and then let Kate charm him into acquiescence. Can you really not see how *weaselly* that is?"

"Weaselly?" Vernon repeated in outrage. "If I had the time, I'd damned well knock you down."

"You can damned well try." Grant returned, but if he'd truly harbored hopes of venting his anger and anxiety on his brother they were fortunately foiled as Vernon stormed out of the church.

*

AS SOON AS he left her side, Kate wanted to call him back. And yet she'd sent him away deliberately because she truly needed to be alone, to think what this huge, terrifying discovery of love meant for her. As soon as they reached her rooms, she sent Little away and paced like the tiger in its cage at the Exchange.

She'd abandoned love when she'd abandoned David Keith for Crowmore. Even then, she'd known she wouldn't have been able to do it if she'd loved David *enough*. And God knew she'd loved no one at all

since then. Moments of liking, excitement were all she'd hoped for and all she'd been capable of. Without Crowmore, it could all have been so peaceful, so quiet and contented.

Until Tristram Grant. She wished she could tear him out of her heart. She could certainly leave, metaphorically throw him away, but the very thought of it twisted her heart so tightly that she had to clutch her breast in physical pain.

"What in God's name has happened to me?" she muttered. "The world would laugh at Kate Crowmore marrying a country curate! How they would sneer and tell each other how low I'd been brought."

She paused, staring down at the street below the window without seeing.

"I don't care," she whispered. She grasped the curtain for support. "I don't care a fig for what the world says. I only care for *him*... Is that the answer then? That I love him, that I *marry* him?"

She'd vowed never to accept that tie again, never to give herself over to any man's legal and physical power. Of all women, a widow had the most freedom, and she would be insane to give that up for anyone, let alone for a penniless clergyman, an earl's bastard son.

And yet marriage with him could never be like it was with Crowmore. Two men could not have been less alike. Tristram wouldn't abuse her, he'd make love to her. She'd wake up beside him every morning. They'd live together, laugh together, *be* together. Do small, worthwhile things together, and maybe some larger and greater. With him, she could be so much more than a fashionable butterfly. She could do good. She really could live here in Blackhaven, with him...

"No, I couldn't," she said miserably. "I'm a selfish, restless, ill-natured woman and I'd make his life hell. I'd make both our lives hell unless we lived apart most of the year. Like Crowmore and me... God help me, I don't want that either. I should run from this."

She even got as far as rushing to her wardrobe and taking out a handful of gowns, throwing them on the bed ready for packing, before she sat down beside them, her head in her hands because she didn't want to leave.

It came to her quite slowly that what she really wanted, what she really needed, was to talk to Tristram about all this. She knew instinctively that whatever his desires, he would understand her doubts and fears, would discuss them with her without judging her or trying to bully her.

He was a remarkable man. No wonder she loved him.

With a choke of laughter that was at least half sob, she jumped up and donned her pelisse and bonnet once more.

Leaving the hotel, she walked briskly round to the vicarage. After a moment's hesitation, she decided to glance into the church first. If he

was there, she'd have no reason to face Mrs. Walsh at the house.

And it seemed he was in the church. As she approached the door, she heard men's voices, and one of them was surely Tristram's. She would have gone in, then—after all, everyone had the right to go into a church, to speak to the clergyman—except that she suddenly recognized the other voice, too. Vernon's.

Her hand froze on the big brass door ring. Footsteps rapidly approached from the other side, but it was Tristram's words that paralyzed her.

"How were you planning to talk our father into this match?"

Her blood ran cold and she barely heard Vernon, "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do," Grant said with a contempt she'd never heard in his voice. My God, was that contempt aimed at her? "You know how he feels about any scandal attaching to his name."

Her mouth opened in shock.

"You're walking proof he's no angel himself," Vernon retorted.

"I don't bear his name, and never would. I may have been looked after but I was never publicly acknowledged. To him, indiscretion is the cardinal sin. Do you really expect him to bless Kate's entry into his family?"

With a gasp, she tore herself away from the door and fled around the side of the church, just before it opened and Vernon stormed out.

How dare he speak of her that way? How dare he?

Panting, she acknowledged he'd spoken no more than the truth, and in her heart she knew his contempt had not been for her but for Vernon and their father. But still, he had no right to discuss her with Vernon, whatever his jealousy. That hurt her, as did the fact that he could be jealous at all. She'd believed he knew and trusted her, but it seemed he was not so different from everyone else after all. That hurt, too.

Everything hurt. Not least because, as she walked swiftly back the way she'd come, keeping well behind Lord Vernon, she realized that it made no difference. She still loved Tristram Grant.

Which didn't mean she wasn't angry and wasn't ready to pay him back.

Lord Vernon was crossing the foyer to the coffee room when she entered the hotel. His face was thunderous, although he did his best to smooth it when he caught sight of her.

"Ah, Vernon," she greeted him, much to his apparent surprise. "Just the man I was looking for. If you have nothing better to do, you may escort me to the Winslows' ball tonight. I've ordered a carriage for nine."

Chapter Fourteen

KATE HAD NOT arrived at Henrit House by the time the ball opened. Grant, anxiously wondering whether she'd decided not to come or if she were merely fashionably late, shared the opening dance with Mrs. Lampton. Grant had driven out to Henrit with them and learned that this would be her last occasion for dancing this year, since she was expecting her first child.

Grant, delighted for them, had wrung Lampton's hand and insisted on enjoying at least two of his wife's last dances.

"By all means," Lampton had agreed generously. "If it gets me off the hook."

"You are a graceless oaf and ill-deserving of your beautiful wife," Grant had informed him.

"Oh, I know *that*," Lampton had said with such sincerity that his wife had kissed him, and Grant had laughed.

"And how go your own romantic entanglements?" Mrs. Lampton asked now as they came together in the dance.

"You make me sound like the town rake," Grant objected.

They separated, turned, and joined hands once more.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Lampton said. "But the town is agog. You are seen so often with a certain titled lady."

They stepped back into their own lines, curtsied, and bowed respectively as the dance came to a close.

"And is the town outraged?" Grant inquired, offering her his arm.

She took it. "Divided. Some are inclined to be scandalized, others to protect you, others again who believe there's nothing to it but pastoral care. Cheer up, it would be worse if she were a permanent member of your congregation."

"I believe you encouraged me in that direction, too," Grant recalled.

"I never said I wasn't mischievous. So what of the beautiful Lady C? Is she in your power, or are you in hers?"

She couldn't have timed it better if she'd tried. Before Grant could answer the question, a late arriving couple appeared in the archway that was the ballroom entrance. Three steps led down from it so new arrivals were highly visible, and this couple caught every eye in the ballroom.

"Lord Vernon and Lady Crowmore," the liveried servant

announced.

She took his breath away. Her raven hair was swept into a vaguely Grecian style, braided with glittering diamonds, with one long, apparently escaping curl just caressing one pale, sloping shoulder. The effect was classically decadent, especially in conjunction with the diaphanous, all but transparent gown that clung to her figure. She must have dampened it. It was pure white, its shapely neck revealing the beauty of her shoulders while, in contrast to other daring gowns of the time, maintaining the modesty of her breasts. A gauzy net that might have been made of air, were it not for the glimpses of red and gold, was draped across her elbows.

One, white-gloved hand lay loosely on Lord Vernon's arm. He, of course, was impeccably turned out in black satin knee breeches and a coat that fitted him so closely Grant had no idea how he got it on and off. His stance was haughty, and yet there was more than pride in the restless, swiveling of his eyes. He was uneasy, anxious even, and the cause stood beside him, eclipsing every other lady in the room with her style and beauty—and probably mischief.

Grant's inevitable surge of unworthy jealousy when he saw her with his brother, was quickly drowned in worry for her. Something was wrong.

His instinctive start toward her was brought up short by Mrs. Lampton's tightening grip on his arm.

"Don't run at her," Mrs. Lampton instructed severely. "Contrive to encounter her by accident a little later."

Perhaps his movement had caught Kate's eye, for quite suddenly, she looked right at him.

His breath caught. He waited for the faint, lazy quirk of her sensual lips, the secret, conspiratorial smile meant only for him. It didn't come. She didn't even acknowledge him as her gaze slid free and she languidly descended the stairs.

Mrs. Winslow hurried to greet her titled guests.

"Don't gawp," Mrs. Lampton hissed. "Go and fetch us all a drink."

Grant obeyed, almost numbly. He'd been so sure Kate's temper would be recovered by now, that he could make right whatever he'd done to offend her. But that look scared him. It said she didn't want it put right. It said she wasn't remotely interested in him.

The wicked lady had finished with him.

*

CORNELIUS HAD MADE good time on his journey back to Blackhaven. They'd come partly by short cuts over bumpier roads, which his wound hadn't liked although his urgent brain did. He had hopes that

he might actually have passed Dickie Crowmore on the way and so would reach Kate first.

His hopes were dashed as soon as he walked into the hotel and saw Dickie Crowmore himself, crossing the foyer at the side of an older man who looked vaguely familiar. Surreptitiously keeping his eye on the pair as they climbed the staircase, Cornelius sidled up to the reception desk.

"Please send up to Lady Crowmore that I'd like a word," he murmured. "My name's Cornelius."

"Her ladyship has gone out for the evening, sir," the polite clerk informed him.

Cornelius scowled. "Where to?" Then he slapped his head in sudden memory. "Damnation. It's the ball tonight!" Which meant not only Kate but Tris and Wickenden and the rest of the Muir household would all be out of town at the squire's party. Damn them.

Still at least, it would keep Kate out of Dickie's way for the evening ... though she still had to be warned.

"Where is the wretched ball?" he demanded.

"At Henrit," the young man said, as if everyone knew that.

"And how do I get there?"

"Perhaps you could go with the gentlemen who just arrived, sir. I believe they plan to drive out to the ball just as soon as they can change their clothes. *Lord Crowmore*," the young man explained, clearly impressed. "And Sir Anthony Mere."

Cornelius nodded his thanks. "No need to mention me to them," he said hastily, forking over the last of the money Grant had given him for the journey. "I'll make my own way."

"Mere," he repeated to himself as he strode back across the foyer and out the hotel door. The doorman tipped his hat politely. "I say, give my driver directions to Henrit House, would you?"

The doorman obliged, while Cornelius climbed back into the coach and racked his brain over the name Mere. He threw his head back against the squabs as the horses moved on their weary way.

"Of course." Sir Anthony Mere's only daughter had married the late Lord Crowmore. Kate's father was here in Blackhaven, with none other than Dickie Crowmore. Cornelius supposed that was a good thing. At least she had her father to look out for her.

*

KATE KNEW ALMOST at once that her plan was foolish, hurtful, and pointless.

She saw Grant long before he saw her. Waiting at the side of the arch for Vernon to readjust his cravat in the glass provided on the

wall, she had leisure to glance into the ballroom.

He was dancing with a woman she'd never met but had seen before, at the Assembly ball when she'd also been dancing with Tristram. A young, comely woman with a kind face. A kindness Kate would never have. She wore an old-fashioned and no doubt elderly blue ballgown, and yet, no one would ever notice what she wore. Grant didn't. He talked and smiled with her, perfectly at ease, his expression occasionally sardonic or appreciative. They were clearly on friendly terms, friendly enough to tease each other. She could almost hear their banter as the dance came to a close.

Is that how he is with me?

Her throat closed up. In many ways, Kate was the victim of her own carefully played role in her social world. She knew she dazzled men without inspiring any deep or lasting affection. In truth, that had suited her, until Tristram Grant. She'd thought he was different, and he was. But Kate was still Kate. She could still dazzle the curate—the very odd curate—and inspire him to offer her a quite unequal marriage. It didn't mean he actually *loved* her. Not in any way that mattered. Not any more than he loved the lady currently on his arm.

Kate took Vernon's arm almost mechanically, only vaguely heard the announcement before her eyes refocused on him. He looked straight at her, as if he was about to smile. Only he didn't. Her heart twisted and she moved her gaze forward with her steps.

I can be more than the dazzling curate's wife. I will be more... But this was not the way, this pretense with Vernon just to punish him for discussing her as if her reputation were true.

In characteristic, self-destructive Kate fashion, she was doing her best to ruin the only relationship that had ever mattered to her. And perhaps it would be best for him if she did.

But to walk away would be laziness. Drat it, she *would* be good for him. She *would* make him happy if it took her decades.

A funny choke of laughter escaped her lips, causing Vernon to look at her most oddly. However, civility compelled them both to respond to Mrs. Winslow's welcome, which was surprisingly effusive given her previous coolness to Kate.

Kate waited for Grant to come to her, surreptitiously watching him over her champagne glass, or over the shoulder of the man she was talking to. She didn't dance, but she had plenty of male admirers, several of whom had been at the card party in the hotel. They made the waiting easier, for she didn't need to think in their company. It was so familiar a type as to require merely mechanical responses, smile, flirt, tap the occasional knuckle with her fan, and say anything at all because they weren't listening to her words. And all the time, she waited for Grant.

He sat with Dr. Lampton for a little, and then he strolled over to Wickenden and Gillie who were unfashionable enough to be together at a party. She saw him dance with Miss Winslow, who gazed up at him with adoring eyes, and converse with several different groups of people. His head began to turn in her direction and she looked away.

What was the matter with her? Why did she not simply summon him with her eyes as she could summon any man from Bernard Muir to Wickenden to Mr. Winslow?

"It's him," Vernon said abruptly beside her.

She blinked him into focus. Lord Vernon had left her and returned to her side several times since they'd arrived, though she couldn't quite recall when he'd last reappeared. Irritated now with her admirers, she shook them off and allowed Vernon to lead her away.

"Who?" she asked.

"Tristram. You asked me to bring you to make Tristram jealous."

"Of course I didn't," she said irritably. Then she frowned. "Well, it wasn't quite as simple as that, but perhaps it was something similar."

"Seriously, Kate? You and the *curate*?"

"He is much more than *the curate* and you know it!"

"Of course I do, he's my brother," Vernon retorted. "What I don't understand is why *you* know it? Why do you even know him in the first place and what the devil is he to you?"

"That is none of your business," Kate said loftily. She cast him a quick smile. "On the other hand, I apologize if I misled you. You know I'm selfish and mean. I won't marry you, Vernon, but I hope we can be friends."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you throwing me over again?"

"No. You merely remain thrown."

Vernon gave a reluctant smile. "Damned if I know why I like you, Kate."

"Find yourself a congenial heiress," Kate advised. "You'll come about."

"Maybe I will," Vernon said as his erratic gaze fell on Jenny Smallwood tripping onto the dance floor on Bernard's arm.

"Not that one," Kate said severely. "She's too young and too vulnerable."

"Well if you think I'm going to let you chose which heiress I—" He broke off, staring at the ballroom entrance. "Good God."

Kate followed his gaze and saw Cornelius in the archway, smiling at Mrs. Winslow while clearly apologizing for his improper dress. Obviously, he hadn't had time—or means—to don evening wear.

"Cornelius," she said, starting toward him. "He isn't meant to be here." Vernon allowed himself to be dragged. And approaching from the nearer side of the room, Grant was already there, patiently waiting

for Mrs. Winslow to release her uninvited guest.

Despite his improper dress, it seemed Mrs. Winslow was prepared to tolerate the Honorable Cornelius Fanshawe. Certainly, no one was rushing to arrest him as an escaped French prisoner of war. Of course, he no longer looked the same savage, bearded, ragged person who'd leapt over the harbor wall. Although Kate hoped Major Doverton, who was somewhere in the ballroom, would not come too close.

"Ah, your brother is here, my lord," Mrs. Winslow told Lord Vernon as she rustled past, smiling. "What an unexpected reunion."

"Unexpected indeed," Vernon murmured to Kate. "Tris told me he wasn't here."

"He wasn't. He's come back."

Cornelius was talking quietly and rapidly to Grant, who finally glanced up and saw Kate and Vernon. And this time there was definite alarm in his eyes.

"Gil, take her away from the door," he said urgently.

To her surprise, Vernon actually began to obey, guiding her into a swerve. But she wasn't having that. Pulling her hand free and turning back to Grant and Cornelius, she demanded, "Why are you here, Cornelius? What is—"

"The waltz," Grant interrupted. "Definitely, mine." And before she could think, Grant was at her side, his hand at her elbow, sweeping her onward.

"It is *not* the waltz," she disputed. The orchestra, in fact, was silent.

"It will be any moment," Grant assured her. "I've been counting."

She narrowed her eyes. All over London, it was known as a danger signal. "Do you imagine I can be passed among you like some parcel? Pushed and ordered around like an importunate child?"

"God, no," Grant said so fervently that the wind suddenly vanished from her sails. "Look, I'm well aware you can shake me off one way or another, though you should know I've steeled myself for the blistering verbal attack that I'm sure has sent hundreds of grown men running for cover over the years."

"*Would* you run?" she asked, distracted.

He shook his head. "I can't. I don't want you to see him until you're ready. Or at all, really."

"See who?" She tried for coldness. "You're not making any sense, Mr. Grant."

Grant smiled at Mrs. Fenton and her family as they passed. "Cornelius came back because he saw Dickie Crowmore leave a posting inn in the direction of Blackhaven. Worse, not only has Dickie now booked into your hotel, but he's on his way here to the ball."

Kate frowned. "Surely he can't have been invited."

"There's more. He's with your father."

Her step faltered. "My father?" She didn't know how she felt about that. The sense of betrayal was so familiar it had become part of her. Surely there couldn't be more? She tried to think. "Then Dickie knows I'm not dead."

"Not necessarily. According to what Cornelius learned at the inn, he believed you were dead then."

The orchestra struck up once more. Annoyingly, it was a waltz. He really had been counting the dances. Somewhere it warmed as well as amused her.

She said, "I wrote to my parents last week, just after Mrs. Winslow invited me. I mentioned the ball. Why would my father have come to Blackhaven? Oh dear, do you suppose Dickie told him I was dead?"

"I think it's unlikely." His arm encircled her waist and suddenly old wounds and new fears receded, just because he was there. "Would your father attend a ball if you were dead? I suspect Dickie wants your father with him—along with as many other witnesses as possible—when he receives official news of your death. I'm sure his shock would have been beautiful to behold, although not as impressive as his shock on finding you alive."

It made sense. "He's forming a bond with my father," she said, stepping back with Grant as he began to dance. "They already conspired to hustle me out of London."

Grant nodded. "No doubt Dickie wants your father to vouch for him, officially or otherwise, if any suspicion attaches to him." He glanced toward the entrance, then back to her, and his face softened in a way that melted her heart. "I don't want to be discussing things like this when I'm dancing with you."

"Is *that* why you tried to palm me off on Vernon?" she asked sardonically.

"No, I didn't know how far Dickie was behind Cornelius. I just wanted you away from him. But you don't obey Vernon."

"I don't obey you either," she retorted.

"And yet here you are."

"Because I choose to be."

"After ignoring me all evening?"

In spite of herself, she flushed. She couldn't explain it to herself, let alone to him.

He said softly, "Are we quarrelling, Kate?"

She shook her head, and his thumb caressed her gloved hand. "You confuse me," she said, low. "I don't know what you want of me, what I want of you. This ... frightens me, Tris. And I've had enough of fear. I vowed years ago I would never be frightened again."

His eyes seemed to consume her. "Fear is part of caring. If it helps, I'm terrified."

She swallowed. "Then this is even more insane."

"Perhaps. But you fit so perfectly in my arms, it must be right. I feel I could dance with you right out of the room and across the sky."

"You see?" she managed. "Insane." And yet something in her leapt to meet his words. She wanted to dance away from the world with him. Just with him. She blurted, "I hate that you're Vernon's brother."

A quick frown pulled down his brow. "Don't. I can't change that. It's not as if we'd compare notes."

"Don't you?" she said at once, and his eyes searched hers, his frown deepening.

"Not in any way that matters. Were you at the church this afternoon?"

"Why should you think so?" she countered, unwilling to admit it.

"Because it's the only time I've spoken to Vernon in two years. I'm not perfect, Kate. I'm as jealous as the next man, and it seems I still say things deliberately to hurt my brother. It was never intended to hurt you, and if it did, I'm sorry."

"It's only ever the truth that hurts me."

He jerked her closer, as if by instinct. Certainly, he didn't appear to notice that he held her quite indecorously. His heat burned through the flimsy fabric of her gown.

"The truth is," he whispered intensely. Anticipation closed her throat, churned in her stomach. She couldn't breathe. "The truth is, I —" He broke off, his eyes flying toward the door. Dexterously, he turned her, dancing her away to the far side of the ballroom, and off the dance floor. "There, of course you must have a drink. Champagne, perhaps."

She blinked at him, bemused as he guided her into an anteroom, to a table full of bubbling glasses. It was much quieter than the ballroom, with just three older gentlemen standing in a group near the table.

Grant greeted them politely and picked up two glasses, moving away from the table before he presented one to her.

"Dickie has just arrived," he murmured. "And I presume that's your father with him."

"How do you know Dickie?" she asked curiously.

"I don't. I recognize him from Cornelius's description. *An aggressive slug in an expensive coat.*"

In spite of everything, laughter snatched at her breath. "That's Dickie."

"Besides, Mrs. Winslow clearly didn't know him. Between us, we are bringing her a lot of uninvited guests."

"At least most of them are titled. And fashionable. Her ball will be talked of in Blackhaven for years." Though hopefully not for the wrong reasons.

Grant clinked his glass gently against hers. "I never expected you to be dealing with him face to face. If you just walk past his line of vision once, where people can see his reaction, I'll do the rest."

"Oh, no," Kate said. She sipped her champagne. "I'll face him. I want to see in his eyes what he's done. Tried to do."

A smile tugged at Grant's lips as he raised his glass to her. She swept past him to the door back into the ballroom—and came face to face with Dickie Crowmore.

Chapter Fifteen

HER HEART LURCHED once, but she'd meant what she'd said. She gazed straight into his face without fear.

He seemed frozen, except for the fact that his widening eyes showed a tendency to bulge. She'd never seen blood drain from anyone's face so rapidly. It left his skin livid and he had to clutch at the doorframe as if dizziness almost overcame him.

"Dickie," she drawled. "How wonderful."

"*You*," he uttered. A world of loathing and sheer, stunned astonishment spilled out of that single syllable.

"You seem surprised, Dickie," she observed. "I presumed it was me you'd come to see." She smiled faintly. "You cut me."

Close at her elbow, Grant's hitched breath told her he too was remembering the villain with the knife that would have killed her had it not been for Grant. After all, her pistol could only have stopped one of them.

Perhaps Dickie caught the nuance, too, for color rushed back into his cheeks as fast as it had left.

"Of course, it was you we came to see," said another impatient voice, and at last she saw her father, pushing past Dickie to her. "Katherine."

"Father." She offered her cheek, but she didn't kiss his.

She withdrew before his lips could touch her, if such had been his intention. It had been their mode of greeting for nine years now, since he'd sent her back to her husband. She'd been eighteen years old. Just. And yet still she didn't want to know if he too was surprised to see her alive. If he was, he'd recovered better than Dickie.

Grant's soothing hand was at her elbow. "Shall we move out of the doorway?" he suggested, clearly anxious for her not to be hemmed in. Somehow, he stood between her and the other men, gesturing politely for them to step back into the ballroom.

Her father glared at him. "Who the devil are you?" he demanded, looking him up and down.

"Tristram Grant." He smiled. "I'm the curate."

And somehow, while hysterical laughter tried to rumble up from her stomach, she was in the ballroom with her hand tucked in Grant's arm. Although she still carried her champagne, he'd abandoned his. And nearby, among the crowd, but facing them, stood Wickenden,

Gillie, and Cornelius.

Dickie's still rattled gaze swept over them without interest and then snapped back to the wicked baron.

"How remiss of me," Kate said lazily to Grant. "I should have presented you to my father, Sir Anthony Mere. And my late husband's cousin, Dickie, of course."

The insult was deliberate. As Baron Crowmore, Dickie had precedence over her father. Besides which, she hadn't given him his title, just the nickname he loathed and could never shake off.

Neither her father nor Dickie thought the curate worthy of more than an impatient nod. "So, what brings both of you into exile with me?" Kate inquired.

"Katherine," her father warned, glancing around the several interested people nearby who could hear her quite plainly. He lowered his voice. "Your mother was worried about you."

Kate laughed. Why worry about her once the evil old devil was dead?

"Of course she could not come herself, her health being what it is," her father said, slightly flustered by her reaction.

"Of course," Kate said. "And Dickie also was worried about me?"

"His lordship has been staying with friends in the north," her father said impatiently. "He heard disturbing rumors about you and was coming to see for himself when we fell in together on the final stage of the journey."

"Rumors," Kate repeated, transferring her gaze to Dickie. "They must have been very bad that you couldn't even wait until morning to talk to me about them. You, of all people, should know that there are always rumors about me. But perhaps these latest ones came from your friend, Mr. Tugg?"

For an instant, she saw the truth in his eyes. The shock that she knew. The understanding that Tugg had betrayed him, that he, the new Lord Crowmore, had, in fact, manipulated for just this moment. Kate held his gaze with utter contempt.

"Tugg," her father repeated. "Who's Tugg?"

"Interesting man," Lord Wickenden said suddenly. No one had noticed him moving closer, and all eyes snapped round to him. He smiled and bowed to Kate's father. "Your servant, Sir Anthony. We must talk later."

And now Dickie knew more or less the full extent of this disaster. Wickenden could destroy anyone, socially, with a word. And Dickie's was a lot more than a social crime. A hint of desperation and fury crossed his pale face. But it was momentary. He came up, fighting.

"I should have known I would find his lordship here, by your side, Kate." He smiled. "And didn't I glimpse Lord Vernon, too, when I

arrived? No wonder poor Sir Anthony bolted up here to see what the devil was going on. It will make a delicious tale in London."

Grant took a hasty step forward, though Kate hung onto his arm.

"Oops," Wickenden said in apparent amusement. "I'm at your service, Grant." Which meant he was happy to serve as Grant's second in the duel which would inevitably follow the punch Grant was so clearly about to deliver.

"Diversionary tactics, Dickie?" Kate said, digging her fingers warningly into Grant's arm. "With so much else to talk about, why would anyone choose to discuss you and Tugg?"

"The magistrate might," Tristram said savagely.

"Oh, please," Dickie said with contempt. He didn't even look at Grant. "Would you care to dance, Kate? We might then discuss things privately at the same time."

"The lady is promised to me for this dance," Tristram said.

"In fact, my card is full," Kate confirmed. "But you are quite right. We should discuss family matters in private. And since you are here, even without invitation, let it be now. There is a quieter antechamber at the other end of the ballroom."

"You would know about such a thing. But let us repair there, by all means."

"With Sir Anthony," Tristram interpolated. "And myself."

Dickie curled his lip. "I believe we can dispense with spiritual guidance."

Kate doubted it was the spiritual Tristram had in mind. "Nevertheless, I would like Mr. Grant to be present."

"Wouldn't you be better with the vicar himself?" Dickie murmured as he walked at her other side.

Kate frowned. "The vicar is not here," she said before it dawned on her. Tugg must have told Dickie something about Grant—no doubt to justify the time it had taken him and his cohorts to dispose of her—only promoted him to vicar. No doubt the niceties were lost on Tugg in any case.

Dickie, never one to overlook free champagne and already foiled from his effort to obtain some, seized two glasses from the tray of a passing servant in livery.

In the ante room, Bernard and Jenny Smallwood were glaring at one another and arguing in low, intense voices. Lord Vernon's name was definitely mentioned, so perhaps Kate's campaign in that field was working. The pair broke off at the invasion of so many people at once.

"Be so good as to vacate the room, young man," Crowmore said.

Bernard stared at him. "I will when I'm good and ready. For now, I suggest *you* vacate it and be so good as to mend your manner in the

presence of a lady. Ladies,” he added with a blink as he finally noticed Kate’s presence.

“Why, you puppy!” Crowmore exclaimed. No doubt he was itching to loose his anger on someone who couldn’t ruin him.

“If you please. Bernard,” Kate said quietly. “It’s very important.” She tapped him on the arm with her fan. “Besides, you don’t wish to quarrel with Jenny, you know. You want to dance with her. My apologies, Miss Smallwood.”

Jenny looked more than happy to run away from the influx of angry men, so Bernard shrugged and tucked her hand in his arm before strolling out as if he’d always meant to.

“Thank you,” Grant murmured as they passed him. Before he closed the door, Kate had time to glimpse Wickenden and Cornelius hovering like well-dressed guards.

The room was small, furnished only with a small round table on an oriental rug and two small armchairs. A pleasant breeze drifted through the curtain.

Although she would have preferred to stand, Kate sat simply to prove her ease of mind to Dickie, and set her champagne glass on the table in front of her. At Dickie’s civil invitation, her father took the other chair. Dickie then presented him with one of his champagne glasses.

“We might as well be comfortable,” he observed, raising his glass and taking a sip.

Grant lounged against the wall somewhere behind Kate. When she glanced round at him, he looked very *un*-clergyman-like, much more like the soldier he’d once been, in repose, resting but watchful. Yet Dickie had clearly discounted him as some nonentity Kate had wrapped around her little finger in passing. The thought gave her an instant’s amusement.

“So,” Dickie said, setting his glass down on the table beside Kate’s. “How do we solve this little problem of accusation and counter-accusation?”

“I haven’t heard anyone accuse anyone of anything,” Kate’s father said irritably. “Except you, sir, seem to imagine you may insult my daughter before me with impunity. I am not deaf, sir. And now that we are private, I take leave to tell you I won’t stand for it.”

Kate felt her eyes widen. That was unexpected. She’d expected him to agree with Dickie on that issue at least. Dickie looked more annoyed than surprised, though he covered it almost immediately.

“Come, sir, that is what we will sort out.” Dickie blinked rapidly, forced a smile as he turned his attention back to Kate. “I propose to keep my observations to myself and further to silence any salacious gossip I encounter, so far as is in my power. We both know your

battered reputation can ill stand any more scandal, and the news of your antics up here with at least three lovers—!”

Kate's father leapt to his feet.

“No, no, sir!” Dickie threw up one hand. “I merely illustrate what *could* be said and what I will endeavor to see is *not* said. On the condition that you, Kate, keep your tongue still on matters concerning me.”

“What matters?” Sir Anthony demanded, subsiding back into his chair. His voice dripped with distaste.

“Why, we aren't going to talk about them, are we?” Dickie snatched up his glass and raised it high in an unexpectedly dramatic gesture. Kate watched the candlelight dance through the tiny bubbles in his glass, thinking that she should have known he would negotiate, that she didn't wish him to get off so easily, that in his own way, he was as corrupt and evil as her husband. The question was, would she sacrifice her own peace—and Grant's career in the Church—to bring him to justice? For herself, she'd already faced scandal. Another made no odds. But if she really became the curate's wife...

“A toast,” Dickie declaimed. And quite suddenly, Tristram catapulted past her shoulder and seized Dickie's free hand by the wrist.

Only it wasn't free. His fingers grasped a tiny, open vial. He tried to palm it, but Tristram brutally wrested it from him. Kate leapt to her feet, her reticule dropping to the floor with a clatter. She ignored it.

Dickie had paled again, but still he tried to brazen it out. He held out his hand. “My property, if you please.”

“*Poison?*” Grant said in a strange, intense whisper. “You would truly poison her in front of her own father? How desperate *are* you?”

“You're being ridiculous,” Dickie said coldly. “Of course I was not *poisoning* her.”

Grant raised the vial in front of him. “You were about to pour *this* into her glass while distracting us with your pompous toast.”

“What of it?” Dickie said brazenly. “It wouldn't have harmed her. It wouldn't have killed her.”

“Then what the devil is it?” Grant demanded, sniffing the vial and wrinkling his nose.

“You tried to drug my daughter?” Kate's father said in stark disbelief.

“Oh, don't be so bloody self-righteous!” Dickie exclaimed. “Don't pretend it's not what you want, too, Mere! It's not poison, you imbeciles. *It's to make her miscarry.*”

Kate grasped her chair back for support. He'd found the one thing to unite everyone against her.

But even as the blood sang in her ears, Tristram seized Dickie by

the cravat, yanked him away from her, and punched him full in the face.

Dickie fell back against the wall, stunned, no doubt mentally as well as physically. "Why, you, you..." he spluttered as blood dripped from his nose.

Kate barely noticed. She couldn't take her eyes off Tristram who looked almost as white as Dickie. His gaze locked with hers in a hundred silent messages. Her throat closed up. They might have been the only two people in the room.

But they weren't. Her father let out an urgent cry an instant before she saw Dickie lunge. He'd slung himself off the wall, straight at her. Grant yanked her behind him, but Dickie hadn't been charging at her. He dropped to the floor, seizing her fallen reticule and ripping it open even as he leapt to his feet once more. In his hand was her familiar little pistol, and it was pointed straight at Tristram Grant.

"Oh, dear God," she whispered. She'd only brought it from habit, because it was a familiar sight in her reticule, not from fear. Grant had dismissed Tugg and his associates. She hadn't felt in any danger, and yet now the man he'd saved her from was about to shoot the man she loved beyond all reason, beyond everything before or to come.

"You struck me," Dickie uttered.

"I did. An eye for an eye, Dickie. By biblical justice, I should kill you."

"Then it's as well I hold the gun!"

"You're insane!" Kate's father exclaimed.

Dickie laughed. With a cry, Kate tried to get around Tristram, but he held her back, behind him. They all knew Dickie would shoot. It was in his eyes, which didn't waver, even when the door burst open and Lord Vernon exploded into the room.

There seemed to be no time for him to take in what was happening. Certainly, he didn't pause, just took another smooth leap straight between Dickie and Tristram.

"Gil!" Tristram started forward in fear, but Vernon reached, throwing up Dickie's arm just as the little pistol exploded.

Vernon's fingers grasped the short barrel and in another instant, he had wrested it from Dickie.

Beyond the open door came a scream and several shouts, an upsurge of voices. The orchestra stopped.

Kate could hear Wickenden's voice, calming people. "A bit of an accident, Mrs. Winslow. I wouldn't go in just yet. Let me see to it for you."

And then the door closed once more, this time with Wickenden and Cornelius on the inside.

"You're bleeding," Tristram said shakily.

“Well,” Vernon said. “No one gets to shoot my little brother.” And he sat down quite suddenly on the floor. Kate ran to him.

“Fetch Dr. Lampton,” Tristram flung at Cornelius as he dropped down beside Vernon and Kate.

“I’m fine, damn it,” Vernon protested as Cornelius rushed out again. “I’d watch that bastard, though. Sorry, Kate,” he added.

“I’m watching him,” Wickenden said grimly.

Dickie, in fact, had sunk into the nearest armchair, his head in his hands. He appeared to be shaking. No wonder. He’d tried to commit murder. In public. He really did seem to have lost all self-control.

“Idiot,” Grant said, grasping his brother’s good shoulder while easing his coat off the other. “I’m not worth that.”

Vernon smiled ruefully. “Kate would appear to disagree.”

Grant ignored that. “Thank God. He just caught you as you pushed the gun upward. It’s only nicked the skin. I don’t think it got the bone, but Lampton will check it over and make sure.”

Over Grant’s head, Vernon met Kate’s anxious gaze. “It doesn’t matter though. I heard some of what Dickie said, and he’s right about one thing. We can’t avoid the scandal, any of it. It will all be added to and speculated over. All we can do is limit it, and for that, you need to marry me. I’ll call the child Crowmore’s or mine, whichever you prefer, but it’s me you need to marry. Because of the child. Tell her, Tris. You know it’s true.”

Tristram turned his head toward her. His face was white, his eyes anguished as he tried to consider what was best for his brother’s child. His lips quirked, though it didn’t quite amount to a smile. As clearly as if he spoke the words, he told her he would not choose for her, as he so easily could. To him, this had to be her decision, and it was time she made it.

She did.

“He’s right, Katherine,” her father said in a strangled voice. “You have to marry Vernon. As soon as possible.”

This had gone far enough.

“Why are you all so obsessed with my unborn child?” she demanded. “Do you imagine I would *ever* have been foolish enough to deliver a child into Crowmore’s power? There was never any possibility of a child. Not Vernon’s since he was never my lover, and certainly not Crowmore’s. Because Dickie’s frightened of something doesn’t make it fact. I am not and never have been *enceinte*.”

They all gaped at her.

Tristram began to smile in earnest.

Dickie took his head out of his hands and stared at her.

Her father said, “Then why the *devil* didn’t you tell us all this in the first place?”

“Because my marriage was none of your business. You, Father, made that clear a long time ago. Why bother when no one would believe me? Also, I’m perverse.”

“Kate, you idiot, it nearly got you killed,” Tristram said shakily.

“Oh, there was always more than that to get me killed. Even without a child, Dickie wanted back all the settlements my husband made on me when we married. The Crowmore estate does little more than pay Dickie’s debts. He needs the money settled on me in order to live as he’s accustomed to. Don’t you, Dickie?”

Dickie sneered and stood up. “Well, you might have the money, Cousin, but you aren’t going to enjoy it. I think it’s time your hosts learned exactly who they’re entertaining in this ridiculous little town. And trust me, word *will* get back to London.”

He made a charge for the door.

“Keith,” Grant warned, starting after him. But to Kate’s amazement, Wickenden merely opened the door politely and bowed him out.

“They don’t know him,” Kate said uneasily. “They don’t know who fired the shots. Whatever he’s going to say will cause *damage*. Who is the magistrate? Is he here at the ball?”

“Magistrate?” Dr. Lampton said, striding in with his familiar bag and looking around for his patient. “Our host, Mr. Winslow.”

Kate could already hear Dickie’s voice raised, addressing his hosts in a voice loud enough to be heard by the whole company, which had again fallen silent. Kate wondered dully if Mrs. Winslow would hate her more for ruining the ball or for what Dickie was saying about her, confirming all Blackhaven’s worst suspicions.

“...all know she was dragged from her lover’s bed to receive the news of her husband’s death!”

“You’ll live,” Dr. Lampton was telling Vernon behind her. “But you must keep that wound clean. I’ll bandage it for you now and check on it again tomorrow. I’d advise you to rest, for you’ve had a shock and lost some blood besides.”

“Thanks,” Tristram said in relief. “It was damned impressive. I didn’t know he could move so fast.”

Kate, glad of their banter, tilted her chin and did what she always did—faced the storm head-on and alone. She had to put distance between herself and Tristram Grant.

She walked out of the open door as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

Dickie, in the middle of the room, was warming to his theme, for his appalled audience seemed spellbound by his salacious revelations. No one noticed her at first as she weaved her way among the other guests. She kept her gaze on Dickie, a carefully amused expression on

her face as his crude insults battered her, making her cringe inside, no longer just for herself, but for the man who loved her against all the odds.

"Would you really accept such a woman into your homes, allow her to contaminate your daughters—and sons!—with her ill-bred promiscuity?" Dickie inquired.

He was too animated right now to resemble the slug Cornelius called him. In fact, his eyes were too bright, and spittle sprayed from his mouth as he talked. The words spilled from him like the poison he'd tried to pour into her glass, years of frustration and hatred, intensified a hundredfold by his humiliation tonight. By his final failure. He'd played and lost, and he meant to ruin her irrevocably, drag her down with him on his way to perdition.

The worst of it was that he didn't *appear* to be performing. He might have been imparting some kindly-meant warning to his hostess, except that his voice was raised a little with passion, and the ballroom had fallen silent to hear.

"Dear God, ma'am," Dickie said sorrowfully, "she has no less than three lovers at the very least, in this town alone. In your house this very evening."

They began to notice her. More and more eyes swiveled toward her, both men and women, some embarrassed, some angry or appalled, contemptuous or wickedly amused.

She'd seen it all before, in London, when she'd walked into the first soiree after Crowmore's death. Everyone, even those she'd regarded as friends, who'd accepted her help or given theirs in the past, had turned from her with just those expressions, giving her the cut direct. It had been a humiliating mistake. The world had known she and Crowmore had loathed each other and yet she was meant to pretend grief at his death.

Honesty hadn't helped her then and it wouldn't now. All she could do was keep this to herself. She couldn't think of the future, the dazzling happiness she'd almost achieved with Tristram before Dickie started pulling it down around her ears. There should have been a way to stop him, but it was too late now.

His eyes met hers across the room. He actually smiled with triumph, and delivered the killer blow. "She's only here in Blackhaven to give birth to her illegitimate child out of the public eye. She means to pass it off as the late Lord Crowmore's."

It didn't matter that it wasn't true. That the lie would be called when no child was born. The damage would have been long done.

Holding her gaze, he began again. "Don't allow this trollop, this—"

"My lord!" Mrs. Winslow's hand shot up quite suddenly to silence him. "I will hear no more. I beg leave to inform you, you are vilely

traducing a friend of mine. A friend of all of us in the vicinity of Blackhaven.”

Kate’s lips fell apart. There was nothing she could do about it.

Mr. Winslow strode over to stand by his wife. “And you have the gall to do it in my house, where you were not even invited, using language quite unfit for the occasion. You, sir, despite your noble title, are no gentleman, and you are not welcome here. Or anywhere in Blackhaven, I daresay. My servants will show you out. Though they may call upon you in the morning concerning other matters, such as the firing of a pistol. Good evening, sir.”

As several liveried servants moved in on him, a hand brushed against Kate’s. Grant’s.

“How long have you been there?” she murmured.

“All the time.”

“You fool,” she whispered. “I was trying to save you.”

“There was no need. Wickenden was right. Blackhaven loves you.”

“I don’t know why.” Suddenly she wanted to cry. His fingers curled around hers and she clung to them.

Dickie was backing away from the servants, his face wild and hunted.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Winslow spoke into the growing hubbub of noise. Dickie turned and bolted up the steps and through the arch, the servants at his tail. Wickenden, Cornelius, Bernard, and several other gentlemen followed discreetly. “We apologize unreservedly for what you were forced to hear. I’m afraid through shock we let him continue too long. Lady Crowmore.” He bowed to her. “We particularly apologize to you for such insult given under our roof.”

Grant released her fingers, gave her a little push, and she almost stumbled forward under everyone’s gaze. It came to her that some of the anger and contempt she’d seen had been aimed not at her but at Dickie’s disgusting tirade.

“I hope you will not hold it against us,” Mrs. Winslow said with a slightly nervous smile.

Kate swallowed, walking up to her with her hand held out. “On the contrary. I’m so glad to have such friends.” And as Mrs. Winslow took her hand, the tears started, and the older lady put her arm around her. “There, my dear, you have had a terrible experience, I think. Come with me, now. Gillie?”

And Gillie was there, on her other side, helping her out of the ballroom and into the privacy of an empty room upstairs where she could cry her eyes out.

Chapter Sixteen

GRANT FELT UNSPEAKABLY proud of his flock for taking Kate's side. He had been too eager to protect her, but Wickenden, or perhaps Gillie, had known that Blackhaven society would close ranks around her. Even those who disliked her or her reputation, were appalled by Dickie's nasty performance and couldn't help but feel sorry for anyone so publicly vilified. More than that, her hard-clinging fingers, her very breathing had told him how tightly she was wound, how everything that had happened since Crowmore's death, and in all the abusive years of her marriage, had come to the fore, crying for an outlet she refused to give it.

It had hurt not to be the one to hold her, but some instinct had told him she was better with Mrs. Winslow and Gillie. Perhaps she could weep out the old hurt before truly letting him in to make her happy.

But as he ran out into the hall to find out where Dickie had gone, her face swam constantly before his eyes. The way she'd looked at him after he'd knocked Dickie down, her heart in her eyes.

Wickenden strolled through the front door, several servants behind him.

"Where did he go?" Grant asked. "Have they caught him?"

"No, he'd left his carriage waiting, for apparently he hadn't meant to stay. He just jumped in it and drove off. Bernard and some of the others have ridden after him to see where he goes, but his horses aren't fit for much more. He'll have to stop at the hotel. I'm sure Winslow will arrest him in the morning. Which won't stop him spewing his filth in the dock or anywhere else. Newspapers will have a field day. But I believe it's he who'll be the laughing stock. Public opinion will turn back toward Kate."

"She can't stay at the hotel tonight, then," Grant said firmly, latching on to the immediate.

"Absolutely not. I'm sure Gillie will bring her back with us."

"He'll need to be watched," Grant added, frowning. "He's unstable and he sees Kate as the root of all his problems."

"She'll be fine with us," Wickenden soothed.

Grant cast him a quick smile. "Am I being too—ah—mother hen?"

"Not in the circumstances." Wickenden laid a hand on his shoulder and lowered his voice. "You know what you're taking on with her?"

"I believe so," Grant replied steadily.

"She's wild and willful as well as fun, but her heart is true. And Grant ... Gillie believes there was cruelty in her marriage."

"So do I."

Wickenden's fingers tightened painfully. "Christ. And I didn't see. Nobody saw. You will be good to her, my friend?"

It wasn't quite a question, but he must have seen in Grant's face that it required no answer.

Wickenden grinned and dropped his hand. "In a million years, I could never have imagined her with a curate."

"Ah well, I'm not just any curate, am I?" Grant said lightly.

"No," Wickenden agreed. "That, you're not."

From the ballroom came the strains of music once more. As they re-entered, couples were already forming for the next dance. Leaving Wickenden to report to Mr. Winslow, Grant went toward the anteroom in search of his wounded brother.

He met Vernon emerging from the doorway, his arm in a sling, his coat dashingly loose around his wounded shoulder. He and Cornelius seemed to be comparing wound stories, in which contest Vernon was not best pleased to be coming off second best.

Behind them, Lampton shrugged his shoulders at Grant. "I hope you have no more brothers."

Grant sighed. "You know. I thought you would work it out."

"My dear fellow, everyone knows. They're not hiding it."

"My father will explode," Grant observed. He didn't greatly care. "Thanks for taking care of him. Both of them!"

"Pleasure, dear boy."

Mrs. Winslow appeared in the entrance arch, searching, until her gaze found Grant. She descended at once, coming directly for him.

"More patients?" Lampton asked. He seemed very good natured about losing his leisure time in work.

"Possibly," Grant said worriedly, going forward to meet his hostess. "Mrs. Winslow, how does Lady Crowmore?"

"She was a little overcome," Mrs. Winslow confessed. "And who can blame her? However, she is recovering quickly. I left her with Gillie—um Lady Wickenden. But she is asking for you. I believe it would make her comfortable to return to the ballroom on your arm."

"Doesn't she wish to go home?" Lampton asked in surprise.

Grant smiled in spite of himself. Not his Kate. She never gave in. Even asking for Grant's support was rare.

"Apparently not," Mrs. Winslow said, preening slightly as though she took it as a complement to her ball. "She claims she will be ready to return in five minutes. How is your patient, Dr. Lampton?"

"Young and strong, and he will mend," Lampton said.

Grant left them to it and rejoined his brothers, now the center of a little group of mainly young men demanding to know what had occurred and who had shot Vernon. Both thrived inevitably on the attention, although they turned it into a joke, belittling Vernon's heroism and dismissing Dickie Crowmore as crazy.

When Vernon's erratic gaze fell on Grant, he eased himself away from the group with a joke and joined him. "How's Kate?"

"Recovering, I think. She was very touched by the Winslows' support."

"Surprised me," Vernon admitted. "I heard they cut her dead in London. Don't look at me like that," he added, scowling. "I heard your last lecture and I haven't come to quarrel with you. In fact, I've got something for you. Come back in here for a minute."

He all but dragged Grant back into the anteroom, which had been returned to its former state of order. A small hole in the elegant cornice was barely noticeable, especially since the plaster dust below it had been swept up.

"What?" Grant demanded, anxious to be meeting Kate.

Vernon drew in his breath. "Look, I won't deny I want Kate, and I would, whether she had money or not. And she *should* marry me, you know, for my honor if no one else's. But it ain't me *she* wants, is it? It's you. And I can see it's you she needs. I'm not stepping aside, Tris, because she's already stepped over me to get to you! But, damn it, I wish you both all the best. Here." He took a battered looking folded paper from an inside pocket in his coat. "I don't think there's any blood on it."

"What is it?" Impatiently, Grant took it from him and unfolded it.

"Special license. Marriage license. I brought it with me from London, thinking to use it for Kate and me. But you might as well have it. I expect you can change the name and make it right later. Or something. Hope it helps."

Slowly, Grant raised his gaze to his brother's. His heart was racing with excitement. But this was Kate. He had to be sure it was the right thing for her at this moment.

"Thank you," he said. "I believe it does."

"What in God's name are you doing?" exclaimed a voice at the door.

Grant almost groaned as Sir Anthony Mere walked in. Kate's father was the last person he wanted to see at this moment. How much had he heard?

"You, sir," Mere growled at Vernon, striding into the room. "Do you have the gall to pass my daughter off onto this ... this..."

"Curate," Grant supplied helpfully.

Clearly, the man had overheard too much, and Grant struggled

with what to do about it. Despite believing the worst of his daughter, Mere had travelled all this way to see her. And he'd defended her to Dickie's face, although Grant had the feeling this stemmed as much from outraged pride as from care for her.

There might have been hope for Mere and his relationship with Kate, but that was for the future. Grant doubted Kate was up to a major scene with her father at this moment, and Grant's first concern was for her.

He turned resolutely to face Sir Anthony. "Firstly, sir, no one can pass your daughter off on anyone. She will make her own decisions. And secondly, neither of us would do anything to hurt her."

"Where is she?" Mere demanded, only partially mollified.

"With Mrs. Winslow and Lady Wickenden, I believe," Vernon said. "She is being looked after."

Sir Anthony cast a dubious glance between them, then turned and went out.

Vernon gave Grant a lopsided grin and slapped him on the back with his good hand. "Good luck. I still hate you, you bastard."

Grant smiled. "No, you don't. But I owe you, Gil. A lot."

"No," Vernon said and walked away.

Grant refolded the license and tucked it away inside his own coat before following Vernon out and crossing the ballroom to the stairs. To his relief, Sir Anthony Mere sat at the back of the room, in quiet conversation with Mr. Winslow.

On leaving the ballroom, Grant saw Gillie first. Pretty and vivacious, she stood outside the nearest door off the hall, telling some witty story to someone who stood inside the doorway.

She broke off when she saw him, and grinned. "But here is Mr. Grant. I shall leave him to your tender mercies." She tripped toward him, just touching his hand on the way past—a gesture of encouragement or a warning to be gentle, he couldn't tell which. For his attention was all on the woman emerging from the doorway.

Her beauty caught at his breath, more than ever before, because with it came the vulnerability she'd always kept so well hidden. Her eyes were bright and clear, the only sign of recent tears, but her lips seemed to tremble when she smiled.

His throat closed up. But he understood she was held together by a thread, so he smiled back and bowed elaborately. "My Lady Crowmore. May I have the honor of this dance?"

"I have lost my card, but I suppose you may." It wasn't a bad effort.

He smiled and offered his arm. "The villain has fled," he said lightly. "With the noble youth of Blackhaven hallooing after him. But the party goes on."

"Thank God for parties."

"I do, I do."

Her breath caught. "Are you never offended by anything I say?"

"You know I'm not. I know what's in your heart."

"No, you don't," she said with spirit. "You just think you do."

"Perhaps. Certainly, I know what's in mine."

They'd reached the arch and paused a moment, looking down into the bright, colorful ballroom. Two sets were dancing a lively country dance. There would have been more had some of the young men not been chasing Dickie across the country. Grant hoped they'd come back soon.

"Shall we?" he asked lightly.

"Of course."

As they descended the steps, the country dance came to an unexpectedly quick end. The couples, looking slightly surprised, hadn't even cleared the floor before the orchestra broke into a waltz.

"Are they rushing to catch up?" Grant asked, amused.

"No," Kate replied. "I asked Mrs. Winslow to arrange it."

He blinked down at her, a smile forming on his lips that he couldn't stop. "You did, didn't you? Have I told you that I love you?"

"You might have mentioned it."

"Then, shall we waltz?"

"I insist upon it."

His arm was around her waist before they even reached the dance floor and he swept her into the beguiling rhythm of the waltz.

She said, "You stood by me. I was trying to spare you, and you stood by me anyway."

"I will always stand by you. Vernon's failure to do so in London was down to lack of imagination rather than ill-nature."

"I know," she snapped, revealing at last the frayed nature of her nerves. She drew in her breath. "Please don't talk about Vernon."

"We have to, in passing. He's my brother and he's part of your past. I bear him no ill will for his attraction to you. How could I?"

"And me?" she said, tilting her chin. "Is there no sliver of blame for me?"

"None. If you have none for me."

Her eyes searched his and slowly, deliciously, began to melt. "I suppose you waltz well. I like to waltz with you."

"I like to waltz with you, too." In spite of his best intentions, his body grew warm and urgent. The feel of her frail, provocative person in his arms almost tore him apart. He wanted to protect her from the world, from the brutality of men. And he wanted to ravish her. He bent his head, leaning too close to her. "Will you elope with me, Kate?"

Her eyes held his. "I thought you'd never ask."

His breath caught on laughter, and her eyes reflected his smile. "I mean to marry you."

"I know."

Inevitably, he followed the draft of cool air and danced her through the open French door to the brightly lit terrace. A quick glance showed him they were alone.

He swung her round against the house wall, hiding her from anyone who might glance through the door. "Is that a yes?"

Her quickened breath caressed his lips. "Yes."

The relief was like a pain. He knew it was what she needed, but her acknowledgement meant the world. "I should do it now before you change your mind." He inhaled her scent, like heady wine.

"Do what?" she asked huskily. "Kiss me? Make love to me?"

"Oh yes. Here, now, would make me very happy."

She parted her lips, inching them so close to his he could taste her.

"You're teasing me," he whispered.

"I thought you were teasing me."

His lower lip just touched hers, because one of them trembled, and he was almost lost. "I never tease. I always meant to marry you."

"I withdraw my objections."

"Because I'm not Crowmore?"

"Because you're you."

He closed his eyes before he crushed her against the wall and made her his against all propriety and good manners. Abruptly, he swung around, seizing her hand and breaking into a run. "Then let's go."

"Go where?" She gave in, running with him in her dancing slippers across the terrace and down the path to the stables.

"Aha," he said mysteriously.

*

KATE'S STRANGE MERRY-GO-ROUND of an evening was, apparently, not yet over. Far from humiliating her, her bout of crying had left her feeling almost cleansed, as well as awed by the kindness of Mrs. Winslow and Gillie, who actually seemed to *like* her. She emerged from it clear-sighted and light-headed, as though a massive burden she hadn't known she carried, had floated away with her tears.

And now here she was, running through the Winslows' garden to the stables, apparently eloping with Tristram Grant. She suspected it was more in the nature of a secret tryst, and that he would call the banns tomorrow. Could you call the banns on your own wedding? Either way, she trusted him. Her excitement was akin to the childish feeling of getting into some forbidden escapade with her brothers, and

yet the constant desire bubbling in the pit of her stomach was not remotely childish.

"I'm borrowing Lord Wickenden's carriage and will send it back directly," he told the surprised stable lads. "Bring it out, would you? And would someone convey the message to Lady Wickenden that I shall escort Lady Crowmore home. I'll write to your master in the morning."

"You are frighteningly efficient, aren't you?" Kate said in mock admiration.

"You have no idea."

She didn't ask until they were in the carriage, bowling along the drive and onto the road away from Blackhaven.

She gave in. "Where are we going?"

"Eloping."

"All the way to Gretna Green?"

"Not unless you particularly wish to. I'd never get the carriage back to the Wickendens in time."

"Then we're not going far?"

He shook his head. "No, but it's too far to walk in your dancing slippers."

Only five minutes later, they pulled up at the gate of a fairly large but solitary cottage. From the carriage lights, and the one shining from the downstairs window, she saw that it had a neat little garden at the front.

Intrigued, although it was not remotely what she had imagined, she allowed Grant to hand her down and lead her up the garden path. She hoped it wasn't symbolic.

Grant knocked at the door.

"Won't they mind visitors at this hour?" Kate murmured belatedly. "It must be almost midnight."

"I don't think he'll mind."

The door was opened a crack, and then fully, by an elderly manservant. "Is that you, Mr. Grant?"

"Yes, it is, Knollys. Sorry to be so late! Is Mr. Dallas still up?"

"Yes, sir. Come in."

The elderly Knollys led them across the hall to the nearest door, which he opened. "Mr. Grant is here, sir, with a lady."

"Indeed?" came a slightly frail but interested voice. "Show them in directly."

Knollys bowed them into the room. Despite the warmth of the summer evening, a fire burned merrily in the grate. Beside it, among a clutter of books and shawls, sat an old man, a book on his lap that he'd clearly been reading by the light of the lamp beside him.

"Tristram, dear boy. Madam." He began to rise, but Kate went

swiftly toward him.

"No, please don't get up, sir. We have disturbed you at a quite unseemly hour."

"I suppose it is, although I confess at my age I like to be disturbed occasionally. Who have you brought to see me, Tristram?"

"Lady Crowmore."

The old man's sharp eyes flickered. He clearly knew the name, although his smile was just as sweet and welcoming.

"Kate," Tristram said, "this is Mr. Dallas, who was the vicar of St. Andrews before Mr. Hoag."

"Ah." Somewhat bemused, she shook hands with the Reverend Mr. Dallas and sat in the nearby chair he indicated.

"Knollys will bring us some tea," Mr. Dallas said comfortably. "I'm afraid I no longer have anything stronger in the house. Now, what can I do for you?"

"Marry us, if you please," Grant said bluntly.

The old man blinked. "Gladly. But you could have asked me tomorrow. I would still have said yes."

"I know. But I want you to marry us tonight."

Kate turned her head and stared at Grant. "Don't be silly. He can't."

Grant slipped his hand inside his coat and brought out a crumpled piece of folded paper. "Yes, he can. I have a special license. My brother gave me it, but I don't believe you'll quibble."

"Vernon had a special license?" Kate exclaimed.

"Yes, he acquired it in London before he left. I believe giving it to me is by way of a blessing. Do you mind?"

Mr. Dallas took it, pushing his spectacles up his nose. He unfolded it, adjusting the distance of the paper from his face until he could read it.

Kate swallowed. "I don't know. I thought you were pretending about eloping. I thought you would call the banns tomorrow."

"We can still do it that way."

"Then why are you here?" Mr. Dallas regarded them over the rim of his spectacles, one to the other.

"Because it seemed the right thing to do," Grant said quietly. "Is it?"

Kate's sudden sense of panic faded as she looked at him. All that was left was the excitement, the desire. She nodded, once.

"You are aware," Mr. Dallas said, "that hurried marriages like this cause speculation and scandal?"

"I am no stranger to scandal, sir. But if it will hurt Tristram, we won't do it."

Mr. Dallas smiled, his glance oddly piercing as he continued to

examine each of them. "Very well," he said. "I'll do it."

Knollys appeared with the tea just then. Mr. Dallas asked Kate to pour, then turned to the servant. "Is Emmy gone to bed yet?"

"I believe she's just about to."

"Desire her to step in here, with you. We're going to have a wedding."

Chapter Seventeen

THE CONTRAST WITH her first spectacular wedding couldn't have been greater.

In the cluttered cottage parlor, after tea, Kate and Tristram knelt at the feet of the old clergyman, who said the sacred words and led them through their vows. The only witnesses were Knollys and a smiling young kitchen maid called Emmy. And yet this was the wedding that seemed so *huge*. She'd gone carelessly through the first, at once naive and worldly, and she'd paid for both attitudes. The importance of what she was doing here almost overwhelmed her, and yet she had no intention of drawing back. It was terrifying and beautiful, and she'd never wanted anything so much in her life.

Her lips trembled with sheer emotion when Tristram kissed her. As if in a dream, she rose to her feet as Mrs. Tristram Grant and was toasted in fresh tea.

"Perhaps you'd like to stay here for tonight," Mr. Dallas suggested. "Since I understand your carriage has gone."

"Your efficiency didn't stretch that far," Kate murmured.

"Actually, it did," Tristram said from the window, where he'd been gazing out at the sky. He let the curtain fall and glanced back over his shoulder with an apologetic smile at Mr. Dallas. "I was hoping we could indeed stay here until the morning."

"Knollys will help me up to bed," Dallas said, as the servant all but lifted him out of the chair and supported him toward the door. "And then he'll show you to the spare bedchamber. I hope you'll be comfortable."

Kate blinked after his retreating back, murmuring a dazed goodnight. She sat back in her chair. "What a very odd evening it's been. I confess I never saw it ending like this."

Tristram said, "It hasn't ended."

And her whole body flushed, churning with emotions she couldn't begin to sort out. This man was her *husband*.

He walked toward her. "Shall we make an assignation?"

"Mr. Dallas's spare bedchamber in half an hour?" she said lightly.

"Or your hotel tomorrow, the vicarage in three days, or Scotland in a week. Or the Muirs' cave whenever you like—providing the smugglers aren't active. I mean, you can choose. I know I rushed you into this on a wave of emotion."

“Isn’t that the way it’s meant to be done?” She looked up at him as he came to a halt before her. “Are you regretting this already?”

He shook his head quite definitely. “How could I? I’m trying to be kind, to give you time.”

“Mr. Grant,” she said with a faint shake in her voice. “I’ve been trying to seduce you since I met you.”

The spontaneous smile she loved broke out on his face as he bent and took her hand, drawing her to her feet. “Were you born this outrageous?”

“Yes, I think so.”

He bent his head, his breath not quite steady on her lips. “Why don’t you let *me* seduce *you*?”

As his mouth closed on hers, she couldn’t imagine a more delicious outcome. She clung to his lips, opening to him as her hand reached up to touch his cheek. His kiss burned her, engulfing her, drowning that insidious, insistent panic that haunted her idea of marriage. It didn’t change who he was, didn’t dampen her ardor or his.

The kiss ended, and her eyes fluttered open to meet his, warm and clouded and hungry. Her stomach seemed to delve and melt as he bent for another kiss and another.

They separated only when the door began to open and Knollys coughed in discreet warning. “This way, if you please.”

At some point, the cottage had been extended, and the spare bedchamber turned out to be the upper floor of this addition, more spacious and less cluttered than the other rooms Kate had seen, giving the impression not only of privacy but of being in a different house entirely.

“Mr. Dallas’s granddaughter stays here on occasion,” Knollys volunteered. “There is a most pleasant view, as you’ll discover in the morning. I have brought fresh water for washing, and Mr. Dallas begs you will make use as you wish of the nightgowns and so on in the chest of drawers. Is there anything else you might require?”

“No. No, thank you, Knollys,” Tristram said.

The servant bowed and left them where they stood side-by-side just inside the door.

“Where was I?” Tristram murmured.

“Here.” She lifted her face and kissed him.

But now, in the privacy of their borrowed bedchamber, it was not enough.

With a gasp, she all but threw herself against him. They stumbled back against the wall, their mouths locked together. With wild triumph, she felt the hardness against her abdomen growing with shocking speed. She smiled against his lips and swayed against him, caressing him with her whole body.

He groaned, his back braced against the wall, deepening the kiss, his hands stroking her face, her neck, shoulders, and down to her waist. Dragging his mouth down her jaw, he fastened it to the pulse at the base of her throat. She reached between them for the flap of his breeches.

His breath hitched. He let her unbutton him, and then, slowly, lifted his head, his eyes, blazing.

"Come," she whispered. "Come to bed."

A smile flickered across his face, half voracious, half mischievous. Languidly, he shook his head. "Not yet."

And with dizzying speed, their positions were reversed. Now her back was against the wall and his hips pinned her there while he shrugged off his coat and tore off his necktie. Then, with agonizing slowness, he drew the pins and the diamond string from her hair, and returned to kissing her mouth while his fingers made short work of the fastenings of her gown.

"You do that too easily for a clergyman," she said breathlessly.

"I wasn't always a clergyman."

"Were you a rake?" she asked with interest as her gown and undergown dropped around her elbows. His eyes devoured her, dissolving her anxiety into heat and pleasure.

"I liked women," he admitted, though distractedly. His hands slid upward from her waist, until his thumbs caressed her naked breasts, pressing sweetly on her nipples.

She swallowed. "Liked? Past tense?"

He smiled and bent his head to take one nipple into his mouth. "Now, there is only you."

Her eyes closed in bliss. She wanted him inside her with ever-increasing urgency, but whenever she tried to push him toward the bed, he held her where she was, continuing to worship her body with unhurried hands and lips.

Her clothes lay puddled around their feet. She wore nothing more than her dainty ruby necklace and earrings. He shifted position, kissing her mouth while his caressing hand swept downward and settled between her thighs.

She gasped. Her hands, which had been clutching at his shirt in frustrated desire, opened wide in shock. But his caress was soft and exquisite, and the sweetness intensified impossibly, spilling through her in a rushing wave of delight she couldn't control.

Only his hands held her up. Her dazed eyes opened into his blazing ones.

"What was that?" she whispered in wonder.

"Oh, my darling," he said huskily, and there was pity, surely as well as lust in his eyes. "Let me show you." He swept her up in his

arms at last and carried her to the bed.

She cried out with sheer bliss when he entered her. She hadn't known that could feel so good either. Crowmore's assaults had given her no idea except that there had to be more. But she'd never dreamed of pleasure like this, of tenderness like this. The candle cast flickering light and shadow across his handsome face as he rocked above her, within her, his every movement a caress, bringing her nearer and nearer to something tremendous.

For herself, she moved from sheer instinct, sheer desire, coupled with a profound need to make him happy. And she could not doubt that she did please him. He let her see and hear just how much. His breathing was wild and short and sometimes his whole body trembled with his effort to control his passion.

She bit his shoulder, caressing it with her teeth. "Let go, my love," she whispered. "Let go."

And suddenly he did, plunging deep and hard within her until she fell headlong once more into joy. Only then, at last, did he collapse upon her, groaning into her mouth as he found his own, massive release.

*

AS MEN DID, he fell asleep. She didn't mind, for he did so with his arms around her, cradling her head on his chest. She soaked up his hard warmth, inhaled his scent, and smiled, just because she was happy. And fulfilled. She'd never understood what that meant before. She'd known desire, just not what could come of it. Life with her curate, it seemed, was exciting from the outset.

Raising her head, she gazed down at him in the guttering candle light. In sleep, his face was still, as it never was at any other time. He looked younger, without care or responsibility. Which he wasn't. He cared for the world, and yet he had a special place for her. His wife. His lover.

With the tip of her finger, she traced a crease on his chest, caused by her lying on him. She got distracted by the scattering of hair on his chest, narrowing into a distinct line on his stomach. For the first time, she noticed a jagged scar on his side, a souvenir, no doubt of a battle he never mentioned. He would, in time. She had a lifetime to learn what had come before. In the meantime, she followed the creased line until it vanished into the sheet.

"Does it disgust you?" he said quietly. "Because I'm afraid there are more of them."

She shook her head, embarrassed to have been caught, and yet pleased he was awake. "I love all of you."

A slow smile broke over his face. "Do you really?"

"You know I do."

"But you never said so before. I just wanted to hear it again." He reached up to her neck and drew her mouth down to his.

"How has this happened to us so quickly?" she whispered.

"I don't know. But I think we should thank God and gracefully accept it." He rolled her beneath him. "Would you mind, madam, if I availed myself once more?"

She stretched provocatively, loving every inch of his arousal and her own. "Sir," she drawled. "I insist upon it."

*

KATE COULD HAVE cheerfully stayed in bed all the next day, wrapped in the warmth of this new intimacy, to say nothing of the pleasure of Tristram's loving. But in the end, after a mere couple of hours of sleep, Tristram rose and dressed as though trying not to wake her. She watched him, unseen, until he began to walk back toward the bed and saw her open eyes.

"Good morning," she said, suddenly shy.

He sat down on the bed and kissed her. "It's Sunday," he said ruefully. "And I have to be at church."

She sat up. "It's time to face Blackhaven."

"Are you up to it?"

"If you are."

In the end, they drove into town with Mr. Dallas, who had decided his presence at church would be advisable, since he had performed the marriage ceremony.

"The bishop will not approve," he warned with unexpected worldliness, "so it's important to win the congregation over and see that things run on as well as they did before."

They stopped briefly at Henrit so that Kate could leave a note of apology for Mrs. Winslow, explaining her sudden departure and that she had married the curate by special license the night before. At least it would provide warning before the general announcement at church.

When they dropped Tristram at the vicarage, he insisted she wait for Cornelius to go back to the hotel with her. "In case Winslow hasn't arrested Dickie," he said grimly.

Cornelius and Tristram emerged together only moments later.

"Dickie's dead," Tristram said flatly.

"Blew his own brains out all over his hired carriage," Cornelius added.

Kate stared at them. She felt numb.

"Who's the heir now, then? Does the title die?" Cornelius asked.

"No, there's a baby somewhere in Ireland." Kate's words were mechanical. "I never thought he would do that, however insane he appeared."

*

PERHAPS THE SHOCK of the previous night's events and the gruesome discovery of Dickie's body helped dissipate the worst of Blackhaven's disapproval over the curate's hurried marriage to the scandalous widow. That, and the august if frail presence of Mr. Dallas, who had seen fit to perform the ceremony.

There were certainly a few sniffs when Tristram announced his own marriage from the pulpit, and a few raised eyebrows, but final judgement, it seemed, was to be reserved. Once more, Blackhaven would give Kate a chance.

Gillie, whose own marriage to Lord Wickenden had been similarly speedy, was delighted for her.

"Will you have a party at the vicarage?" Gillie suggested, her eyes shining with mischief.

The idea appealed to Kate. "Do you know, I think I will? It's likely to be the only chance I get to play hostess before Mrs. Hoag returns. After all, it is her home."

"What will you do when the Hoags come back?" Gillie asked curiously.

"Take a house in the town if we can. In fact, we're going to look into it with a Mr. Worthing tomorrow."

"Excellent! Give him my regards. Also, you must have your party quickly, for David and I are leaving for London next week."

*

GRANT, ANXIOUS ON Kate's behalf, for he knew she wasn't half so thick-skinned as she pretended, was pleased, on the whole, with how their marriage was received. Initially, Mrs. Winslow had shown a tendency to bridle, but when Grant began to praise her as the catalyst to their happiness, through being so understanding with Kate and sending him to her at the ball, she softened and wished them both very happy.

Kate's father, on the other hand, was not so easily mollified. When Kate had informed him at the hotel, he had refused to come to church. Grant called upon him in the afternoon, to find him supervising his valet in the packing of his trunk.

"You are leaving," Grant observed. "Kate was hoping you would stay for a few days, having come so far."

Mere cast him a look of acute dislike. "I do not need you to carry messages between my daughter and me," he barked. "You, sir, are a contemptible fortune hunter, and I will do everything in my power to have your so-called marriage annulled."

"Then you will make a fool of yourself and drag your daughter's name through the scandal rags for nothing," Grant said, as calmly as he could. "There are no possible grounds for annulment."

"She was coerced! She must have been. You're not even a *gentleman*, merely a by-blow of Boulton's from all I hear!"

"Which makes me half gentleman, at least. A rather higher proportion than you at this moment. Have you any ways left to insult your daughter? Do you credit her with no sense, no humanity or feeling?"

Mere's complexion inclined toward the purple. "I don't know what you're talking about!" he blustered.

"Then perhaps you should just listen. I don't expect you to be happy with me as your daughter's husband. I'm aware I'm not who you chose, but your choices, sir, have proved faulty in the past, to call them no worse. I'm not a great match. I'm a country curate with no property or expectation beyond what I can earn. But I make your daughter happy."

"Happy! Katherine? Tied to vicarage tea parties in a dreary little town? Are you insane?"

"No," Grant said mildly. "It is you who are insane if you imagine that's all her life will consist of. All that *she* consists of. You don't even know she loves to help people, do you? She will do fine work here among the needy and the sick. And she will still laugh and have fun while she does it. Your daughter is a rare, wonderful person. If you can't see that or wish for her happiness, then I for one will not miss such a father-in-law."

Grant clapped his hat on his head and tipped the brim. "My wife invites you to tea at four. Good day, sir."

As he closed the door behind himself, he thought Sir Anthony resembled a fish on a hook, opening and closing his mouth with no sound coming out.

Although, interestingly, he did come to tea at four. And he stayed two more days in Blackhaven, too.

*

THE DAY SIR Anthony left, Grant received a brief letter from Mr. Hoag stating that the vicar would be back in Blackhaven, though without his family, by the end of the week. Spurred on, Grant and Kate looked at several houses for rent in Blackhaven.

"What do you think?" Tristram asked her as they walked back to the vicarage that Thursday afternoon.

"I think I'll be happy with you wherever we are," she said. And that was true, although there were degrees of comfort associated with it, too.

Tristram cast her a wry smile. "Now the truth, if you please."

She smiled. "The cottage in Braithwaite Close is too cramped," she admitted. "And the house in the square is too large. It will put Mrs. Hoag's nose out of joint if we live there."

"Then we shall keep looking," Tristram said cheerfully.

"Where would *you* most like to live?" she asked. "If you could choose."

He shrugged. "I don't know that I care hugely. It can be a barn, providing I have the peace to make love to you. Constantly."

She flushed with the desire that never seemed to be far away. "Is that an invitation, Master Curate?"

"Oh yes."

"Then I accept. At least the vicarage is still ours for now."

However, when they stepped inside, they found it invaded by both his brothers, quarrelling as usual. Tristram tried to throw them out. Kate shooed them all into the drawing room and asked Mrs. Walsh to bring tea.

This time the Fanshawes were arguing over whether or not Cornelius should go home to his father. He'd apparently written to inform his parent he had returned to England, but that was as far as he'd got. Vernon maintained it would be worse the longer he waited.

"Why should he care?" Cornelius demanded. "He told me not to come back if I had anything more to do with Helene."

"He didn't mean it," Tristram said. "Well, he probably did at the time, but he won't now."

Cornelius cast him an impatient glance. "Which, I suppose, is why *you're* hiding from him!"

"That's different," Grant said. "You're his sons. I'm an obligation—an ungrateful obligation."

"Which neither of you forgives," Kate said with sudden understanding.

Grant's gaze flew to her face. There was pain beneath his rueful smile. "I try. But I am not a *great* man of God."

Vernon hooted derisively and hurled a cushion at him.

"You're barely a man at all," Cornelius added.

Grant caught the cushion in one hand and hurled it at Cornelius, just as the drawing room door opened and Mr. Hoag walked in. Kate recognized him at once and sprang to her feet.

Behind him strolled a younger gentleman—the Earl of Braithwaite

himself—and behind him a tall, older gentleman with a ferocious expression.

Each of them halted in surprise. For an instant, there was total silence in the room. The Fanshawes had never met the vicar, had no idea who he was. But they would know Braithwaite, and were liable to be too comfortable in his company.

Don't throw the cushion back at Tristram, she willed them silently. *Don't throw any cushions!*

Cornelius laid the cushion down beside him. Astonishingly, his impudent face was bright red.

“Mr. Hoag!” Tristram rose with slightly late aplomb, going to shake hands with the vicar. “Welcome back. Let me first introduce my wife.”

“Wife,” Hoag repeated, startled. “Good Lord, I had no idea. How do you do, Mrs. Grant?”

“Very well, sir, and delighted to meet you at last. I must apologize for ensconcing myself in your house—”

“Not at all, my dear, not at all,” the vicar said faintly. “Where else would you ensconce yourself but with your husband? Um—won’t you introduce your guests?”

“There’s no need,” snarled the older gentleman, striding out from behind Mr. Hoag. “I know *all* these miscreants only too well!” He stopped and glared at Vernon and Cornelius who were on their feet looking more hunted than guilty. With foreboding, Kate realized who he must be. “What the devil are you doing here? With *him*?”

The Earl of Boulton—for surely it could be no one else—threw his pointing finger at Tristram without even looking at him.

“They’re visiting,” Tristram said mildly. “As are you.”

Generally, pointing out ill manners to an already angry person is not the quickest way to peace. And certainly, Lord Boulton’s furious face took on a worrying purple hue. However, it seemed there were so many things to anger him that he couldn’t hang on to just one for very long.

“Married?” he repeated. “Married?” He swung at last on Tristram, sweeping his contemptuous gaze over Kate as well as his son. “Who gave you permission to be married?”

“I need none,” Tristram replied.

Lord Boulton ignored that and turned on Kate. “And what poor dab of a creature can you have induced to marry you?”

“That would be me, sir,” Kate said pleasantly, squeezing Tristram’s hand to prevent the explosion of rage already tightening his body. “You must be Lord Boulton.”

The old man glared at her in silence, perhaps temporarily stunned by her calm and collected manner. Fortunately, her old friend Lord

Braithwaite stepped into the breach.

"Kate," he said warmly, holding out his hand to her. "How are you? I was so sorry to hear of your troubles, and now you are married? I cannot keep up with you!"

"My husband, Mr. Grant." It still felt strange and rather wonderful to introduce him this way. "Tristram, this is Lord Braithwaite."

Tristram shook hands with Lord Braithwaite, too, and Kate was pleased to see the tension gone from his shoulders. He'd been taken by surprise but he would not let his unreasonable father rile him again.

Braithwaite turned to the Fanshawes. "Vernon." He offered his hand once more. "I didn't expect to find you here. What brings you to Blackhaven?"

A trivial question, yet impossible to answer honestly. He could not say he came charging up to persuade Kate to marry him, and his presence in the vicarage—with the curate—must have seemed odd, to say the least.

"Actually, my brother," Vernon said with conscious defiance. Inevitably, Braithwaite glanced at Cornelius who certainly looked like his brother, but Vernon would not allow that mistake. "Tristram. He's the curate."

After emitting a small, strangled sound of involuntary outrage, Lord Boulton growled much more audibly, but no one chose to pay him any attention.

"Really?" Braithwaite said, intrigued in spite of himself. After all, he must have heard the rumors of Kate's liaison with Vernon and he could not have avoided the scandal following Crowmore's death.

But Vernon, marching Cornelius with him, chose to march across the room, finally, to greet their father and Mr. Hoag. Lord Boulton looked as if he would crack their heads together if they came close enough, but in the end, clearly baffled by the situation he had no control over, he accepted their respects in silence.

"Ah, tea," Kate said in relief as the trolley appeared through the half open door. "Thank you, Mrs. Walsh. I think we'll need three more cups."

For some reason, this amused Tristram. His eyes were alight with laughter as they met hers, and she couldn't help smiling back.

The ritual of tea pouring covered the awkwardness of the situation for a little, and then Braithwaite attached himself to the Fanshawes, no doubt with the kind intention of mitigating whatever invective their father meant to heap upon them.

Mr. Hoag pulled his chair closer to Grant and Kate. "Hope this isn't awkward for you, Grant."

"Not in the least, although I am surprised."

"It was an odd thing. I'd called at Lord Braithwaite's club in

London—by appointment—to discuss...well, I'll tell you about that in a moment—but your name came up and Lord Boulton suddenly joined us and asked quite bluntly who was this Tristram Grant I spoke of. I had no reason not to tell him, and the upshot was, he accompanied Lord Braithwaite and me up here saying you were a relative he'd lost contact with. Are you truly his son?"

"Illegitimate," Grant said frankly. "And we don't acknowledge it. But he has always looked after me financially. This is between ourselves, sir, although my brothers do seem suddenly determined to spread the relationship."

"Well, it's not a relationship that will do you any harm with Braithwaite," Hoag observed.

Tristram blinked. "With Braithwaite?"

"Well, yes." Mr. Hoag took a deep breath. "Look, it hasn't yet been announced, but I have been appointed the Dean of Brenchurch."

Tristram smiled. "Congratulations, sir. I know it is what you were hoping for and it's truly well deserved."

Although Kate smiled politely, she was instantly uneasy. A new vicar in Blackhaven might be quite averse to Grant for any number of reasons.

"Thank you, thank you," Mr. Hoag beamed. "It's why I'm here, to tie up business and make my farewells. My wife and daughters are en route to Brenchurch now. I also want you to know I recommended you to Lord Braithwaite as my replacement. Which is why he's here."

"To look me over," Tristram said. "And I was throwing cushions at my brother after making a hurried marriage that is the talk of the town."

"Well, at least it's to a friend of his," Mr. Hoag soothed, with a quick smile at Kate. "And to be honest, a wife is good for a vicar."

Not necessarily this wife, Kate thought ruefully.

Mr. Hoag patted Tristram's arm. "Well, you have my recommendation, for whatever that is worth, but the living is in Lord Braithwaite's gift, as you know. And I should warn you there is some cousin or other who's just taken holy orders."

Half an hour later, Lord Braithwaite took his leave, taking with him Lord Boulton who was, apparently, to be his guest at Braithwaite Castle.

At parting, Braithwaite grinned and kissed Kate's hand before turning to Tristram. "Come up to the castle tomorrow, if you can. Shall we say two o'clock?"

"Of course."

"My mother isn't here, of course, but Kate, you're welcome anyhow. Goodbye!"

"You're done for," Cornelius opined when the door was shut

behind them. "Father will have his metaphorical hatchet buried up to the hilt in your back before they're on the castle road."

"I don't know," Kate said. "He came here looking for Tristram. Surely that can't all be spite."

"Yes, it can," all three brothers said at once.

"Still," Tristram said rallying. "At least I've taken the heat off you, Cornelius. He never even asked where you've been for the last year."

Chapter Eighteen

IN THE TIME before they walked up to Braithwaite Castle the following day, Kate realized she would be sorry to leave the vicarage, whether that was to leave Blackhaven altogether or simply to move to a smaller house in the town. Although much more cramped than the great houses she'd grown up in and managed since her marriage, it was a warm house, a comfortable house, and indelibly associated in her mind with Tristram rather than Mr. Hoag.

"What will you do," she asked, "if we have to leave Blackhaven?"

"Seek a living or a curacy, elsewhere."

"Or, perhaps some academic institution?"

"Perhaps."

"You could teach."

"Providing it's not solely overprivileged boys. I think that would bore me after a while. Still, beggars cannot afford to be choosers. Only I don't wish to be separated from you or to drag you away to somewhere you've no wish to be."

She said carefully, "I have enough that we can live without your having to work for a salary."

He nodded and took her hand without looking at her. "Thank you."

"I understand you need to be doing things, making a difference somewhere," she said in a rush. "I just want you to know we have the means to do so anywhere and in any circumstances. It doesn't need to be paid work. And it might be amusing to travel."

He halted, smiling as he turned her into his arms and kissed her. "You are wonderful, and I love you."

She returned the embrace. Several sweet, tender kisses later, he raised his head and straightened her bonnet.

"We shall be the talk of Blackhaven," he said, just a little unsteadily.

"We already are, my dear."

He smiled. "Then let us go on and learn our fate."

And she knew, that whatever Lord Braithwaite said today, Tristram would be happy.

"IT'S TOO VEXING," she said two hours later in the vicarage, as she landed on her back on Tristram's bed. "I had my heart set on being the curate's wife."

Tristram, in his shirtsleeves, eased himself down beside her, caressing the skin between her shoulder and neck in a fascinated kind of way. "I beg you won't repeat that, should I ever be in the position of taking on a curate of my own. In the meantime, you must learn to be content as merely the vicar's wife."

She smiled, throwing her arms around him. "I'm so glad we can stay here. I like this house and you were already the vicar in all but name. The Winslows, Fentons, and Muirs, all spoke for you, according to Braithwaite. And Mr. Dallas, of course. I must say, I think all the more of Braithwaite for this, for it is quite rare for someone in his position to favor a stranger, however talented, over his own kin."

"It is, so I hope you invited him to our party on Saturday evening."

"Of course I did." She caught his straying hand at her breast. "I asked your father, too."

He gave a lopsided smile. "As a reward for not turning Braithwaite against me? I expect he tried, and Braithwaite wouldn't listen."

"If my father and I can be civil to each other," Kate said severely, "so can you and yours."

"You're right, of course. And you know, Braithwaite's attitude to me, as well as Gilbert and Cornelius being so determined to own me as their brother, seem to have made a difference to him. As if he sees me differently."

"Some people need a nudge to make them reasonable again," Kate said. She touched his lips with her finger tips. "Thank you for nudging me. I feel like a girl again. I feel I can be the person I wish to be and be proud of her."

"You were always that person, Kate," he said, softly. He kissed her fingers. They clung to his lips.

"I won't always be so pleasant," she warned. "I have the devil's own temper and I will say such things that—"

He leaned over, stopping her words with a thorough, bone-melting kiss. "What things?" he asked huskily.

"I can't remember," she said, gazing at him in wonder.

"I thought not." He returned to kissing her. "Would you care to be ravished before tea, Mrs. Grant?"

"Yes, please, Mr. Grant," she whispered.

And she was.

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About Mary Lancaster

Mary Lancaster's first love was historical fiction. Her other passions include coffee, chocolate, red wine and black and white films – simultaneously where possible. She hates housework.

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